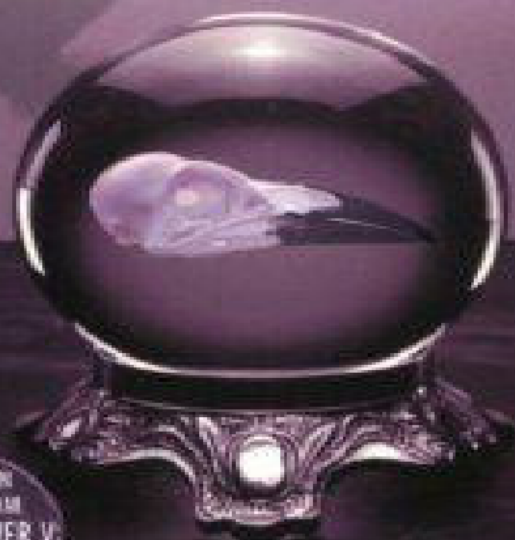




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#1 BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING



INCLUDES AN
EXCERPT FROM
THE DARK TOWER V:
WOLVES OF
THE CALLAI

WIZARD AND GLASS

THE DARK TOWER IV

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

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Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

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By King, Stephen

AR?GUE?MENT

Wiz?ard and Glass is the fourth vol?ume of a longer tale in?spired by Robert

Brown?ing's nar?ra?tive po?em "Childe Roland to the Dark Tow?er Came."

The first vol?ume, The Gun?slinger, tells how Roland of Gilead pur?sues and at last

catch?es Wal?ter, the man in black, who pre?tend?ed friend?ship with Roland's fa?ther

but who ac?tu?al?ly served Marten, a great sor?cer?er. Catch?ing the half-?hu?man Wal?ter

is not Roland's goal but on?ly a means to an end: Roland wants to reach the Dark

Tow?er, where he hopes the quick?en?ing de struc?tion of Mid-?World may be halt?ed,

per?haps even re?versed.

Roland is a kind of knight, the last of his breed, and the Tow?er is his ob ses?sion,

his on?ly rea?son for liv?ing when first we meet him. We learn of an ear?ly test of

man?hood forced up?on him by Marten, who has se?duced Roland's moth?er. Marten

ex?pects Roland to fail this test and to be "sent west," his fa ther's guns for?ev?er

de?nied him. Roland, how?ev?er, lays Marten's plans at nines, pass?ing the test . . .due

most?ly to his clever choice of weapon.

We dis?cov?er that the gun?slinger's world is re?lat?ed to our own in some fun?da?men?tal

and ter?ri?ble way. This link is first re?vealed when Roland meets Jake, a boy from

the New York of 1977, at a desert way sta?tion. There are doors be?tween Roland's

world and our own; one of them is death, and that is how Jake first reach?es Mid-

World, pushed in?to Forty-?third Street and run over by a car. The push?er was a man

named Jack Mort . . . ex?cept the thing hid?ing in?side of Mort's head and guid?ing his

mur?der?ous hands on this par tic?ular oc?ca?sion was

Roland's old enemy, Walter.

Before Jake and Roland reach Walter, Jake dies again ... this time because the

gun-slinger faced with an agonizing choice between this symbolic son and the Dark

Tower, chooses the Tower. Jake's last words before plunging into the abyss are

"Go, then—there are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs near the Western Sea.

In a long night of palaver, the man in black tells Roland's future with a strange

Tarot deck. Three cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of the Shadows, and Death

("but not for you, gun-slinger")—are especially called to Roland's attention.

The second volume, The Drawing of the Three, begins on the edge of the Western

Sea not long after Roland awakens from his confrontation with his old nemesis

and discovers Walter long dead, only more bones in a place of bones. The

exhausted gun-slinger is attacked by a horde of carnivorous "lobstrosities," and

before he can escape them, he has been seriously wounded, losing the first two

fingers of his right hand. He is also poisoned by their bites, and as he resumes his

trek northward along the Western Sea, Roland is sickening ... perhaps dying.

On his walk he encounters three doors standing freely on the beach. These open

into our city of New York, at three different whens. From 1987, Roland draws

Eddie Dean, a prisoner of heroin. From 1964, he draws Odette Susanah Holmes,

a woman who has lost her lower legs in a subway mishap ... one that was no

accident. She is indeed a lady of shadows, with a vicious second personality

hiding within the socially committed young black woman her friends know. This

hidden woman, the violent and crafty Detective Walker, is determined to kill both

Roland and Eddie when the gun-slinger draws her into

Mid-?World.

Be?tween these two in time, once again in 1977, Roland enters the hellish mind of

Jack Mort, who has hurt Odet?ta/Det?ta not once but twice. “Death,” the man in

black told Roland, “but not for you, gun?slinger.” Nor is Mort the third of whom

Wal?ter fore?told; Roland pre?vents Mort from murder?ing Jake Cham?bers, and

short?ly af?ter?ward Mort dies be?neath the wheels of the same train which took

Odet?ta’s legs in 1959. Roland thus fails to draw the psychot?ic in?to Mid-?World ...

but, he thinks, who would want such a be?ing in any case?

Yet there’s a price to be paid for re?bel?lion against a fore?told fu?ture; isn’t there

al?ways? Ka, mag?got, Roland’s old teach?er, Cort, might have said; Such is the great

wheel, and al?ways turns. Be not in front of it when it does, or you ‘II be crushed

un?der it, and so make an end to your stupid brains and use less bags of guts and

wa?ter.

Roland thinks that per?haps he has drawn three in just Ed?die and Odet?ta, since

Odet?ta is a dou?ble per?son?al?ity, yet when Odet?ta and Det?ta merge as one in

Su?sannah (thanks in large part to Ed?die Dean’s love and courage), the gun slinger

knows it’s not so. He knows some?thing else as well: he is be?ing tor ment?ed by

thoughts of Jake, the boy who, dy?ing, spoke of oth?er worlds. Half of the

gun?slinger’s mind, in fact, be?lieves there nev?er was a boy. In pre?vent ing Jack

Mort from push?ing Jake in front of the car meant to kill him, Roland has cre?at?ed a

tem?po?ral para?dox which is tear?ing him apart. And, in our world, it is tear?ing Jake

Cham?bers apart as well.

The Waste?lands, the third vol?ume of the se?ries, be?gins with this para?dox. Af?ter

killing a gi?gan?tic bear named ei?ther Mir (by the old people who went in fear of it)

or Shardik (by the Great Old Ones who built it... for the

bear turns out to be a

cy?borg), Roland, Ed?die, and Su?san?nah back?track the
beast and dis cov?er Path of

the Beam. There are six of these beams, run?ning be?tween
the twelve por?tals which

mark the edges of Mid-?World. At the point where the
beams cross—at the cen?ter

of Roland's world, per?haps the cen?ter of all worlds—the
gun?slinger be?lieves that

he and his friends will at last find the Dark Tow?er.

By now Ed?die and Su?san?nah are no longer pris?on?ers in
Roland's world. In love

and well on the way to be?com?ing gun?slingers them?
selves, they are full par?tic?ipants

in the quest and fol?low him will?ing?ly along the Path of
the Beam.

In a speak?ing ring not far from the Por?tal of the Bear,
time is mend?ed, para?dox is

end?ed, and the re?al third is at last drawn. Jake reen?ters
Mid-?World at the

con?clu?sion of a per?ilous rite where all four—Jake, Ed?
die, Su?san?nah, and

Roland—re?mem?ber the faces of their fa?thers and ac?quit
them?selves hon?orably.

Not long af?ter, the quar?tet be?comes a quin?tet, when
Jake be?friends a bil?ly-?bum?bler.

Bum?blers, which look like a com?bi?na?tion of bad?ger,
rac?coon, and dog, have a

lim?it?ed speak?ing abil?ity. Jake names his new friend Oy.

The way of the pil?grims leads them to?ward Lud, an ur?
ban waste?land where the

de?gen?er?ate sur?vivors of two old fac?tions, the Pubes
and the Grays, car?ry on the

ves?tige of an old con?flict. Be?fore reach?ing the city, they
come to a lit?tle town

called Riv?er Cross?ing, where a few an?tique res?idents
still re?main. They rec?og?nize

Roland as a rem?nant of the old days, be?fore the world
moved on, and hon?or him

and his com?pan?ions. Af?ter, the old peo?ple tell them of a
mono?rail train which may

still run from Lud and in?to the waste?lands, along the Path
of the Beam and to?ward

the Dark Tow?er.

Jake is fright?ened by this news, but not re?al?ly sur?prised;

before being drawn away

from New York, he obtained two books from a bookstore owned by a man with

the thought-provoking name of Calvin Tower. One is a book of riddles with the

answers torn out. The other, Charles the Choo-Choo, is a children's book about a

train. An amusing little tale, most might say . . . but to Jake, there's something

about Charles that isn't amusing at all. Something frightening. Roland knows

something else: in the High Speech of his world, the word char means death.

Aunt Talitha, the matriarch of the River Crossing folk, gives Roland a silver cross

to wear, and the travelers go their course. Before reaching Lud, they discover a

downed plane from our world—a German fighter from the 1930s. Jammed into the

cockpit is the mummified corpse of a giant, almost certainly the half-mythical

outlaw David Quick.

While crossing the dilapidated bridge which spans the River Send, Jake and Oy

are nearly lost in an accident. While Roland, Eddie, and Susanah are distracted

by this, the party is ambushed by a dying (and very dangerous) outlaw named

Gasher. He abducts Jake and takes him underground to the Tick-Tock Man, the

last leader of the Grays. Tick-Tock's real name is Andrew Quick; he is the great-

grandson of the man who died trying to land an airplane from another world.

While Roland (aided by Oy) goes after Jake, Eddie and Susanah find the Cardle

of Lud, where Blaine the Mono awakes. Blaine is the last above-ground tool of the

vast computer-system which lies beneath the city of Lud, and it has only one

remaining interest: riddles. It promises to take the travelers to the mono-rail's final

stop if they can solve a riddle it poses them. Otherwise, Blaine says, the only trip

they'll be taking will be to the place where the path ends

in the clear?ing ... to their

deaths, in oth?er words. In that case they'll have plen?ty of com?pa?ny, for Blaine is

plan?ning to re?lease stocks of nerve-?gas which will kill ev?ery?one left in Lud: Pubes,

Grays, and gun-?slingers alike.

Roland res?cues Jake, leav?ing the Tick-?Tock Man for dead ... but An drew Quick is

not dead. Half blind, hideous?ly wound?ed about the face, he is res?cued by a man

who calls him?self Richard Fan?nin. Fan?nin, how?ev?er, al?so iden?ti?fies him?self as the

Age?less Stranger, a de?mon of whom Roland has been warned by Wal?ter.

Roland and Jake are re?unit?ed with Ed?die and Su?sana?h in the Cra?dle of Lud, and

Su?sana?h—with a lit?tle help from “dat bitch” Det?ta Walk?er—is able to solve

Blaine's rid?dle. They gain ac?cess to the mono, of ne?ces?si?ty ig nor?ing the hor?ri?fied

warn?ings of Blaine's sane but fa?tal?ly weak un?der?mind (Ed?die calls this voice Lit?tle

Blaine), on?ly to dis?cov?er that Blaine means to com?mit sui?cide with them aboard.

The fact that the ac?tu?al mind run?ning the mono ex?ists in com?put?ers falling far?ther

and far?ther be?hind them, run?ning be neath a city which has be?come a slaught?er?ing-

pen, will make no dif?fer?ence when the pink bul?let jumps the tracks some?where

along the line at a speed in ex?cess of eight hun?dred miles an hour.

There is on?ly one chance of sur?vival: Blaine's love of rid?dles. Roland of Gilead

pro?pos?es a des?per?ate bar?gain. It is with this bar?gain that The Waste lands ends; it

is with this bar?gain that Wiz?ard and Glass be?gins.

romeo: La?dy, by yon?der blessed moon I vow,

That tips with sil?ver all these fruit-?tree tops—

juli?et: O, swear not by the moon, th' in?con?stant moon,

That month?ly changes in her cir?cled orb,

Lest that thy love prove like?wise vari?able.

romeo: What shall I swear by?

juli?et: Do not swear at all.

Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gra?cious self,

Which is the god of my idol?atry,

And I'll be?lieve thee.

—Romeo and Juli?et William Shake?speare

On the fourth day, to [Dorothy's] great joy, Oz sent for her,
and when she en?tered

the Throne Room, he greet?ed her pleas?ant?ly.

“Sit down; my dear. I think I have found a way to get you
out of this coun?try.”

“And back to Kansas?” she asked ea?ger?ly.

“Well, I'm not sure about Kansas,” said Oz, “for I haven't
the faintest no?tion which

way it lies....”

—The Wiz?ard of Oz L. Frank Baum

I asked one draught of ear?li?er, hap?pi?er sights,

Ere fit?ly I could hope to play my part.

Think first, fight af?ter?wards—the sol?dier's art:

One taste of the old time sets all to rights!

—Childe Roland to the Dark Tow?er Came

Robert Brown?ing

PRO?LOGUE

BLAINE

“ASK ME A RID?DLE,” Blaine in?vit?ed.

“Fuck you,” Roland said. He did not raise his voice.

“WHAT DO YOU SAY?” In its clear dis?be?lief, the voice of
Big Blaine had

be?come very close to the voice of its un?sus?pect?ed twin.

“I said fuck you,” Roland said calm?ly, “but if that puz?zles
you, Blaine, I can make

it clear?er. No. The an?swer is no.”

There was no re?ply from Blaine for a long, long time, and
when he did re?spond, it

was not with words. In?stead, the walls, floor, and ceil?ing
be?gan to lose their col?or

and so?lid?ity again. In a space of ten sec?onds the Barony
Coach once more ceased

to ex?ist. They were now fly?ing through the moun?tain-
range they had seen on the

hori?zon: iron-?gray peaks rushed to?ward them at sui?ci?
dal speed, then fell away to

dis?close ster?ile val?leys where gi?gan?tic bee?tles crawled
about like land?locked

tur?tles. Roland saw some?thing that looked like a huge
snake sud?den?ly un?coil from

the mouth of a cave. It seized one of the bee?tles and
yanked it back in?to its lair.

Roland had never in his life seen such animals or count
try?side, and the sight made

his skin want to crawl right off his flesh. Blaine might have
transported them to
some other world.

"PERHAPS I SHOULD DETRAIL US HERE," Blaine said. His
voice was

meditative, but beneath it the gunslinger heard a deep,
pulsing rage.

"Perhaps you should," the gunslinger said indifferently.

Edie's face was frantic. He mouthed the words What are
you DOING? Roland

ignored him; he had his hands full with Blaine, and he
knew perfectly well what
he was doing.

"YOU ARE RUDE AND ARROGANT," Blaine said. "THESE
MAY SEEM

LIKE INTERESTING TRAITS TO YOU, BUT THEY ARE
NOT TO ME."

"Oh, I can be much ruder than I have been."

Roland of Gilead unfolded his hands and got slowly to
his feet. He stood on what

appeared to be nothing, legs apart, his right hand on his
hip and his left on the

sandalwood grip of his revolver. He stood as he had so
many times before, in the

dusty streets of a hundred forgotten towns, in a score of
rocky canyon killing-

zones, in numbered dark saloons with their smells of
better beer and old fried

meals. It was just another show down in another empty
street. That was all, and

that was enough. It was khaf, ka, and ka-tet. That the
showdown always came was

the central fact of his life and the axle upon which his
own ka revolved. That the

battle would be fought with words instead of bullets this
time made no difference;

it would be a battle to the death, just the same. The stench
of killing in the air was

as clear and definite as the stench of exploded cart-
rion in a swamp. Then the battle-

rage descended, as it always did ... and he was no longer
reality there to himself at

all.

“I can call you a non?sen?si?cal, emp?ty?head?ed, fool?ish machine. I can call you a stupid, un?wise crea?ture whose sense is no more than the sound of a win?ter wind in a hol?low tree.”

“STOP IT.”

Roland went on in the same serene tone, ig?nor?ing Blaine com?plete?ly. “You’re what

Ed?die calls a ‘gad?get.’ Were you more, I might be rud?er yet.”

“I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—”

“I could call you a suck?er of cocks, for in?stance, but you have no mouth. I could

say you’re vil?er than the vilest beg?gar who ev?er crawled the low?est street in

cre?ation, but even such a crea?ture is bet?ter than you; you have no knees on which

to crawl, and would not fall up?on them even if you did, for you have no

con?cep?tion of such a hu?man flaw as mer?cy. I could even say you fucked your

moth?er, had you one.”

Roland paused for breath. His three com?pan?ions were hold?ing theirs. All around

them, suf?fo?cat?ing, was Blaine the Mono’s thun?der? struck si?lence.

“I can call you a faith?less crea?ture who let your on?ly com?pan?ion kill her?self, a

cow?ard who has de?light?ed in the tor?ture of the fool?ish and the slaugh?ter of the

in?no?cent, a lost and bleat?ing me?chan?ical gob?lin who —”

“I COM?MAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I’LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!”

Roland’s eyes blazed with such wild blue fire that Ed?die shrank away from him.

Dim?ly, he heard Jake and Su?san?nah gasp.

“Kill if you will, but com?mand me noth?ing!” the gun? slinger roared. “You have

for?got?ten the faces of those who made you! Now ei?ther kill us or be silent and

lis?ten to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gun?slinger, and lord of an?cient

lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years

to lis?ten to your

child?ish prat?ing! Do you un?der?stand? Now you will lis?ten to ME!"

There was an?oth?er mo?ment of shocked si?lence. No one breathed. Roland stared

stern?ly for?ward, his head high, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Su?san?nah Dean raised her hand to her mouth and felt the small smile there as a

wom?an might feel some strange new ar?ti?cle of cloth?ing—a hat, per?haps—to make

sure it is still on straight. She was afraid this was the end of her life, but the feel?ing

which dom?inat?ed her heart at that mo?ment was not fear but pride. She glanced to

her left and saw Ed?die re?gard?ing Roland with an amazed grin. Jake's ex?pres?sion

was even sim?pler: pure ado?ra?tion.

"Tell him!" Jake breathed. "Kick his ass! Right!"

"You bet?ter pay at?ten?tion," Ed?die agreed. "He re?al?ly doesn't give much of a fuck,

Blaine. They don't call him The Mad Dog of Gilead for noth?ing."

Af?ter a long, long mo?ment, Blaine asked: "DID THEY CALL YOU SO,

ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"They may have," Roland replied, stand?ing calm?ly on thin air above the ster?ile

foothills.

"WHAT GOOD ARE YOU TO ME IF YOU WON'T TELL ME RID?DLES?"

Blaine asked. Now he sound?ed like a grum?bling, sulky child who has been

al?lowed to stay up too long past his usu?al bed?time.

"I didn't say we wouldn't," Roland said.

"NO?" Blaine sound?ed be?wil?dered. "I DO NOT UN?DER?STAND, YET VOICE-

PRINT ANAL?YSIS IN?DI?CATES RA?TIO?NAL DIS?COURSE. PLEASE

EX?PLAIN."

"You said you want?ed them right now" the gun?slinger replied. "That was what I

was re?fus?ing. Your ea?ger?ness has made you un?seem?ly."

"I DON'T UN?DER?STAND."

"It has made you rude. Do you un?der?stand that?"

There was a long, thoughtful si?lence. Cen?turies had passed since the com?put?er had

ex?pe?ri?enced any hu?man re?spons?es oth?er than ig?no?rance, ne?glect, and su?per?sti?tious

sub?servience. It had been eons since it had been ex?posed to sim?ple hu?man

courage. Fi?nal?ly: "IF WHAT I SAID STRUCK YOU AS RUDE, I APOL?OGIZE."

"It is ac?cept?ed, Blaine. But there is a larg?er prob?lem."

"EX?PLAIN."

"Close the car?riage again and I will." Roland sat down as if fur?ther ar?gu?ment—and

the prospect of im?me?di?ate death—was now un?think?able.

Blaine did as he was asked. The walls filled with col?or and the night mare

land?scape be?low was once more blot?ted out. The blip on the route-?map was now

blink?ing close to the dot marked Can?dle?ton.

"All right," Roland said. "Rude?ness is for?giv?able, Blaine; so I was taught in my

youth. But I was al?so taught that stu?pid?ity is not."

"HOW HAVE I BEEN STUPID, ROLAND OF GILEAD?" Blame's voice was

soft and omi?nous. Su?san?nah thought of a cat crouched out side a mouse-?hole, tail

swish?ing back and forth, green eyes shin?ing with malev?olence.

"We have some?thing you want," Roland said, "but the on?ly re?ward you of?fer if we

give it to you is death. That's very stupid."

There was a long, long pause as Blaine thought this over. Then: "WHAT YOU

SAY IS TRUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, BUT THE QUAL?ITY OF YOUR

RID?DLES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT RE WARD YOU WITH YOUR

LIVES FOR BAD RID?DLES."

Roland nod?ded. "I un?der?stand, Blaine. Lis?ten, now, and take un?der stand?ing from

me. I have told some of this to my friends al?ready. When I was a boy in the

Barony of Gilead, there were sev?en Fair-?Days each year—Win?ter, Wide Earth,

Sow?ing, Mid-?Sum?mer, Full Earth, Reap?ing, and Year's End. Rid?dling was an

im?por?tant part of ev?ery Fair-?Day, but it was the most im?por?tant event of the Fair

of Wide Earth and that of Full Earth, for the rid?dles told were sup?posed to au?gur

well or ill for the suc?cess of the crops."

"THAT IS SU?PER?STI?TION WITH NO BA?SIS AT ALL IN FACT," Blaine said.

"I FIND IT AN?NOY?ING AND UP?SET?TING."

"Of course it was su?per?sti?tion," Roland agreed, "but you might be sur?prised at how

well the rid?dles fore?saw the crops. For in?stance, rid?dle me this, Blaine: What is the

dif?fer?ence be?tween a grand?moth?er and a gra?nary?"

"THAT IS OLD AND NOT VERY IN?TER?EST?ING," Blaine said, but he sound?ed

hap?py to have some?thing to solve, just the same. "ONE IS ONE'S BORN KIN;

THE OTH?ER IS ONE'S CORN-?BIN. A RID?DLE

BASED ON PHO?NET?IC CO?IN?CI?DENCE. AN?OTH?ER OF THIS TYPE, ONE

TOLD ON THE LEV?EL WHICH CON?TAINS THE BARONY OF NEW YORK,

GOES LIKE THIS: WHAT IS THE DIF?FER?ENCE BE TWEEN A CAT AND A

COM?PLEX SEN?TENCE?"

Jake spoke up. "I know. A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a com?plex

sen?tence has a pause at the end of its clause."

"YES," Blaine agreed. "A VERY SIL?LY OLD RID?DLE, USE?FUL ON?LY AS A

MNEMON?IC DE?VICE."

"For once I agree with you, Blaine old bud?dy," Ed?die said.

"I AM NOT YOUR BUD?DY, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK."

"Well, jeez. Kiss my ass and go to heav?en."

"THERE IS NO HEAV?EN."

Ed?die had no come?back for that one.

"I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-?DAY RID?DLING IN GILEAD, ROLAND

SON OF STEVEN."

"At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, some?where be?tween six?teen and thir?ty

rid?dlers would gath?er in the Hall of the Grand?fa?thers, which was opened for the

event. Those were the on?ly times of year when com mon folk—mer?chants and

farm?ers and ranch?ers and such—were al?lowed in?to the Hall of the Grand?fa?thers,

and on that day they all crowd?ed in.“

The gun?slinger’s eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the ex?pres sion Jake had

seen on his face in that misty oth?er life, when Roland had told him of how he and

his friends, Cuth?bert and Jamie, had once sneaked in?to the bal?cony of that same

Hall to watch some sort of dance-?par?ty. Jake and Roland had been climb?ing in?to

the moun?tains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail of Wal?ter.

Marten sat next to my moth?er and fa?ther, Roland had said. I knew them even from

so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slow?ly and re?volv?ing?ly, and the

oth?ers cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the

gun?slingers did not clap....

Jake looked cu?ri?ous?ly at Roland, won?der?ing again where this strange man had

come from . . . and why.

”A great bar?rel was placed in the cen?ter of the floor,“ Roland went on, ”and in?to

this each rid?dler would toss a hand?ful of bark scrolls with rid dles writ up?on them.

Many were old, rid?dles they had got?ten from the el ders—even from books, in

some cas?es—but many oth?ers were new, made up for the oc?ca?sion. Three judges,

one al?ways a gun?slinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they

were ac?cept?ed on?ly if the judges deemed them fair.“

”YES, RID?DLES MUST BE FAIR,“ Blaine agreed.

”So they rid?dled,“ the gun?slinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he

thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sit?ting

across from him with the bil?ly-?bum?bler in his lap. ”For hours on end they rid?dled.

A line was formed down the cen?ter of the Hall of the Grand?fa?thers. One’s po?si?tion

in this line was de?ter?mined by lot, and since it was much bet?ter to be at the end of

the line than at the head, ev?ery?one hoped for a high draw, al?though the win?ner had

to an?swer at least one rid?dle cor?rect?ly.

“OF COURSE.”

“Each man or wom?an—for some of Gilead’s best rid?dlers were

wom?en—ap?proached the bar?rel, drew a rid?dle, and if the rid?dle was still

unan?swered af?ter the sands in a three-?minute glass had run out, that con?tes?tant

had to leave the line.”

“AND WAS THE SAME RID?DLE ASKED OF THE NEXT PERSON IN THE LINE?”

“Yes.”

“SO THE NEXT PER?SON HAD EX?TRA TIME TO THINK.”

“Yes.”

“I SEE. IT SOUNDS PRET?TY SWELL.”

Roland frowned. “Swell?”

“He means it sounds like fun,” Su?san?nah said qui?et?ly.

Roland shrugged. “It was fun for the on?look?ers, I suppose, but the con?tes?tants took

it very se?ri?ous?ly. Quite of?ten there were ar?gu?ments and fist?fights af?ter the con?test

was over and the prize award?ed.”

“WHAT PRIZE WAS THAT, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?”

“The largest goose in Barony. And year af?ter year my teach?er, Cort, car?ried that goose home.”

“I WISH HE WERE HERE,” Blaine said re?spect?ful?ly. “HE MUST HAVE BEEN

A GREAT RID?DLER.”

“In?deed he was,” Roland said. “Are you ready for my pro?pos?al, Blaine?”

“OF COURSE. I WILL LIS?TEN WITH GREAT IN?TER?EST, ROLAND OF GILEAD.”

“Let these next few hours be our Fair-?Day. You will not rid?dle us, for you wish to

hear new rid?dles, not tell some of those mil?lions you al?ready know—”

“COR?RECT.”

“We couldn’t solve most of them, any?way,” Roland went

on. "I'm sure you know

rid?dles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the

bar?rel." He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the

time to use the feath?er had come.

"OF COURSE," Blaine agreed.

"In?stead of a goose, our lives shall be the prize," Roland said. "We will rid?dle you

as we run, Blaine. If, when we come to Tope?ka, you have solved ev?ery one of our

rid?dles, you may car?ry out your orig?inal plan and kill us. That is your goose. But if

we pose you—if there is a rid?dle in ei ther Jake's book or one of our heads which

you don't know and can't an swer—you must take us to Tope?ka and then free us to

pur?sue our quest. That is our goose."

Si?lence.

"Do you un?der?stand?"

"YES."

"Do you agree?"

More si?lence from Blaine the Mono. Ed?die sat stiffly with his arm around

Su?san?nah, look?ing up at the ceil?ing of the Barony Coach. Su?san nah's left hand

slipped across her bel?ly, stroking the se?cret which might be hid?den there. Jake

stroked Oy's fur light?ly, avoid?ing the bloody tan?gles where the bum?bler had been

stabbed. They wait?ed while Blaine—the re?al Blaine, now far be?hind them, liv?ing

his quasi-?life be?neath a city where all the in?hab?itants lay dead by his

hand—con?sid?ered Roland's pro?pos?al.

"YES," Blaine said at last. "I AGREE. IF I SOLVE ALL THE RID DLES YOU

ASK ME, I WILL TAKE YOU WITH ME TO THE PLACE WHERE THE

PATH ENDS IN THE CLEAR?ING. IF ONE OF YOU TELLS A RID?DLE I

CAN?NOT SOLVE, I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES AND LEAVE YOU IN

TOPE?KA, FROM WHENCE YOU MAY CON?TIN?UE YOUR QUEST FOR THE

DARK TOWER, IF YOU SO CHOOSE. HAVE I UNDER-
STOOD THE TERMS

AND LIMITS OF YOUR PROPOSAL CORRECTLY,
ROLAND SON OF
STEVEN?"

"Yes."

"VERY WELL, ROLAND OF GILEAD.

"VERY WELL, EDWARD OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, JAKE OF NEW YORK.

"VERY WELL, OY OF MID-WORLD."

Oy looked up briefly at the sound of his name.

"YOU ARE KATET; ONE MADE FROM MANY. SO AM I.
WHOSE KATET

IS THE STRONGER IS SOMETHING WE MUST NOW
PROVE."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the
hard steady throb of the slo-

trans turbines bearing them on across the waste lands,
bearing them along the Path

of the Beam toward Topeka, where Mid-World ended
and End-World began.

"SO," cried the voice of Blaine. "CAST YOUR NETS, WANDERS!
TRY ME

WITH YOUR QUESTIONS, AND LET THE CONTEST BE-
GIN."

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART ONE

RID?DLES

CHAP?TER 1

be?neath the

de?mon moon (I)

1

The town of Can?dle?ton was a poi?soned and ir?ra?di?at?ed ru?in, but not dead; af?ter all

the cen?turies it still twitched with tene?brous life—trundling bee?tles the size of

tur?tles, birds that looked like small, mis?shapen drag?onlets, a few stum?bling robots

that passed in and out of the rot?ten build in?gs like stain?less steel zom?bies, their

joints squalling, their nu?cle?ar eyes flick?er?ing.

“Show your pass, pard!” cried the one that had been stuck in a cor?ner of the lob?by

of the Can?dle?ton Trav?ellers’ Ho?tel for the last two hun?dred and thir?ty-?four years.

Em?bossed on the rusty lozenge of its head was a six-?point?ed star. It had over the

years man?aged to dig a shal?low con?cav?ity in the steel-?sheathed wall block?ing its

way, but that was all.

“Show your pass, pard! El?evat?ed ra?di?ation lev?els pos?si?ble south and east of town!

Show your pass, pard! El?evat?ed ra?di?ation lev?els pos?si?ble south and east of town!”

A bloat?ed rat, blind and drag?ging its guts be?hind it in a sac like a rot ten pla?cen?ta,

strug?gled over the posse robot’s feet. The posse robot took no no?tice, just went on

butting its steel head in?to the steel wall. “Show your pass, pard! El?evat?ed ra?di?ation

lev?els pos?si?ble, dad rat?tit and gods cuss it!” Be?hind it, in the ho?tel bar, the skulls of

men and wom?en who had come in here for one last drink be?fore the cat?aclysm

caught up with them grinned as if they had died laugh?ing. Per?haps some of them

had.

When Blaine the Mono blammed over?head, run?ning up the night like a bul?let

run?ning up the bar?rel of a gun, win?dows broke, dust sift?ed down, and sev?er?al of

the skulls dis?in?te?grat?ed like an?cient pot?tery vas?es. Out?side, a brief hur?ri?cane of

ra?dioac?tive dust blew up the street, and the hitch?ing post in front of the El?egant

Beef and Pork Restau?rant was sucked in?to the squally up?draft like smoke. In the

town square, the Can?dle?ton Foun?tain split in two, spilling out not wa?ter but on?ly

dust, snakes, mu?tie scor?pi?ons, and a few of the blind?ly trundling tur?tle-?bee?tles.

Then the shape which had hur?tled above the town was gone as if it had nev?er been,

Can?dle?ton re?vert?ed to the moul?der?ing ac?tiv?ity which had been its sub?sti?tute for life

over the last two and a half cen?turies . . . and then the trail?ing son?ic boom caught

up, slam?ming its thun?der?clap above the town for the first time in sev?en years,

caus?ing enough vi?bra?tion to tum?ble the mer?can?tile store on the far side of the

foun?tain. The posse ro bot tried to voice one fi?nal warn?ing: “El?evat?ed rad—” and

then quit for good, fac?ing in?to its cor?ner like a child that has been bad.

Two or three hun?dred wheels out?side Can?dle?ton, as one trav?elled along the Path of

the Beam, the ra?di?ation lev?els and con?cen?tra?tions of DEP3 in the soil fell rapid?ly.

Here the mono’s track swooped down to less than ten feet off the ground, and here

a doe that looked al?most nor?mal walked pret?ti?ly from piney woods to drink from a

stream in which the wa ter had three-?quar?ters cleansed it?self.

The doe was not nor?mal—a stump?ish fifth leg dan?gled down from the cen?ter of

her low?er bel?ly like a teat, wag?gling bone?less?ly to and fro when she walked, and a

blind third eye peered milk?ily from the left side of her muz?zle. Yet she was fer?tile,

and her DNA was in rea?son?ably good or?der for a twelfth-?gen?er?ation mu?tie. In her

six years of life she had giv?en birth to three live young. Two of these fawns had

been not just visible but nor mal—threaded stock, Aunt Tal?
itha of Riv?er Cross?ing

would have called them. The third, a skin?less, bawl?ing hor?
ror, had been killed
quick?ly by its sire.

The world—this part of it, at any rate—had be?gun to heal it?
self.

The deer slipped her mouth in?to the wa?ter, be?gan to drink,
then looked up, eyes

wide, muz?zle drip?ping. Off in the dis?tance she could hear a
low hum?ming sound.

A mo?ment lat?er it was joined by an eye?lash of light. Alarm
flared in the doe's

nerves, but al?though her re?flex?es were fast and the light
when first glimpsed was

still many wheels away across the des?olate coun?try?side, there
was nev?er a chance

for her to es?cape. Be?fore she could even be?gin to fire her
mus?cles, the dis?tant

spark had swelled to a sear?ing wolf's eye of light that flood?ed
the stream and the

clear?ing with its glare. With the light came the mad?den?ing
hum of Blaine's slo-

trans en gines, run?ning at full ca?pac?ity. There was a blur of
pink above the

con crete ridge which bore the rail; a roost?er-?tail of dust,
stones, small

dis?mem?bered an?imals, and whirling fo?liage fol?lowed along
af?ter. The doe was

killed in?stant?ly by the con?cus?sion of Blaine's pas?sage. Too
large to be sucked in

the mono's wake, she was still yanked for?ward al?most sev en?
ty yards, with wa?ter

drip?ping from her muz?zle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and
the bone?less fifth leg)

was torn from her body and pulled af?ter Blaine like a dis?card?
ed gar?ment.

There was brief si?lence, thin as new skin or ear?ly ice on a
Year's End pond, and

then the son?ic boom came rush?ing af?ter like some noisy crea
ture late for a

wed?ding-?feast, tear?ing the si?lence apart, knock?ing a sin?gle
mu?tat?ed bird—it might

have been a raven—dead out of the air. The bird fell like a stone
and splashed in?to

the stream.

In the distance, a dwindling red eye: Blaine's tail-light.

Overhead, a full moon came out from behind a scrim of cloud, painting the

clearing and the stream in the tawdry hues of pawnshop jewelry. There was a face

in the moon, but not one upon which lovers would wish to look. It seemed the

scant face of a skull, like those in the Canton Travelers' Hotel; a face which

looked upon those few beings still alive and struggling below with the amusement

of a lunatic. In Gilead, before the world had moved on, the full moon of Year's

End had been called the Demon Moon, and it was considered ill luck to look

directly at it.

Now, however, such did not matter. Now there were demons everywhere.

2

Susanah looked at the route-map and saw that the green dot marking their present

position was now almost halfway between Canton and Rilea, Blaine's next stop.

Except who's stopping? she thought.

From the route-map she turned to Eddie. His gaze was still directed up at the

ceiling of the Barony Coach. She followed it and saw a square which could only

be a trapdoor (except when you were dealing with futuristic shit like a talking

train, she supposed you called it a hatch, or something even cooler). Stencilled on

it was a simple red drawing which showed a man stepping through the opening.

Susanah tried to imagine following the implied instruction and popping up

through that hatch at over eight hundred miles an hour. She got a quick but clear

image of a woman's head being ripped from her neck like a flower from its stalk;

she saw the head flying backward along the length of the Barony Coach, perhaps

bouncing once, and then disappearing into the dark, eyes staring and hair rippling.

She pushed the picture away as fast as she could. The hatch up there was almost

certainly locked shut, anyway. Blaine the Mono had no intention of letting them

go. They might win their way out, but Susanah didn't think that was a sure thing

even if they managed to stump Blaine with a riddle.

Sorry to say this, but you sound like just one more honky motherfucker to me,

honey, she thought in a mental voice that was not quite Detective Walkers. I don't

trust your mechanical ass. You apt to be more dangerous beaten than with the

blue ribbon pinned to your memory banks.

Jake was holding his tattered book of riddles out to the gunslinger as if he no

longer wanted the responsibility of carrying it. Susanah knew how the kid must

feel; their lives might very well be in those grimy, well-thumbed pages. She wasn't

sure she would want the responsibility of holding on to it, either.

"Roland!" Jake whispered. "Do you want this?"

"Ont!" Oy said, giving the gunslinger a forbidding glance. "Olan-ont-iss!" The

bumbler fixed his teeth on the book, took it from Jake's hand, and stretched his

disproportionately long neck toward Roland, offering him Riddle-De-Dum! Brain-

Twisters and Puzzles for Everyone!

Roland glanced at it for a moment, his face distant and preoccupied, then shook

his head. "Not yet." He looked forward at the route-map. Blaine had no face, so

the map had to serve them as a fixing-point. The flashing green dot was closer to

Rilea now. Susanah wondered briefly what the country side through which they

were passing looked like, and decided she didn't really want to know. Not after

what they'd seen as they left the city of Lud.

"Blaine!" Roland called.

"YES."

"Can you leave the room? We need to confer."

You nuts if you think he's gonna do that, Susanah thought,

but Blaine's re?ply was
quick and ea?ger.

"YES, GUN?SLINGER. I WILL TURN OFF ALL MY SEN?SORS IN
THE
BARONY COACH. WHEN YOUR CON?FER?ENCE IS DONE AND
YOU ARE

READY TO BE?GIN THE RID?DLING, I WILL RE?TURN."

"Yeah, you and Gen?er?al MacArthur," Ed?die mut?tered.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK?"

"Noth?ing. Talk?ing to my?self, that's all."

"TO SUM?MON ME, SIM?PLY TOUCH THE ROUTE-?MAP," said
Blaine. "AS

LONG AS THE MAP IS RED, MY SEN?SORS ARE OFF. SEE YOU
LAT?ER,

AL?LI?GA?TOR. AF?TER AWHILE, CROCODILE. DON'T FOR?
GET TO WRITE."

A pause. Then: "OLIVE OIL BUT NOT CAS?TO?RIA."

The route-?map rect?an?gle at the front of the cab?in sud?den?
ly turned a red so bright

Su?san?nah couldn't look at it with?out squint?ing.

"Olive oil but not cas?to?ria?" Jake asked. "What the heck does
that mean?"

"It doesn't mat?ter," Roland said. "We don't have much time.
The mono trav?els just

as fast to?ward its point of end?ing whether Blaine's with us or
not."

"You don't re?al?ly be?lieve he's gone, do you?" Ed?die asked.
"A slip pery pup like

him? Come on, get re?al. He's peek?ing, I guar?an?tee you."

"I doubt it very much," Roland said, and Su?san?nah de?cid?ed
she agreed with him.

For now, at least. "You could hear how ex?cit?ed he was at the
idea of rid?dling again

af?ter all these years. And—"

"And he's con?fi?dent," Su?san?nah said. "Doesn't ex?pect to
have much trou?ble with

the likes of us."

"Will he?" Jake asked the gun?slinger. "Will he have trou?ble
with us?"

"I don't know," Roland said. "I don't have a Watch Me hid?den
up my sleeve, if

that's what you're ask?ing. It's a straight game . . . but at least
it's a game I've played

be?fore. We've all played it be?fore, at least to some ex tent.
And there's that." He

nod?ded to?ward the book which Jake had tak?en back from Oy. "There are forces at work here, big ones, and not all of them are work?ing to keep us away from the

Tow?er."

Su?san?nah heard him, but it was Blaine she was think?ing of—Blaine who had gone

away and left them alone, like the kid who's been cho?sen "it" obe?di?ent?ly cov?er?ing

his eyes while his play?mates hide. And wasn't that what they were? Blaine's

play?mates? The thought was some?how worse than the im?age she'd had of try?ing

the es?cape hatch and hav?ing her head torn off.

"So what do we do?" Ed?die asked. "You must have an idea, or you nev?er would

have sent him away."

"His great in?tel?li?gence—cou?pled with his long pe?ri?od of lone?li?ness and forced

in?ac?tiv?ity—may have com?bined to make him more hu?man than he knows. That's

my hope, any?way. First, we must es?tab?lish a kind of ge?og?ra?phy. We must tell, if

we can, where he is weak and where he is strong, where he is sure of the game and

where not so sure. Rid?dles are not just about the clev?er?ness of the rid?dler, nev?er

think it. They are al?so about the blind spots of he who is rid?dled."

"Does he have blind spots?" Ed?die asked.

"If he doesn't," Roland said calm?ly, "we're go?ing to die on this train."

"I like the way you kind of ease us over the rough spots," Ed?die said with a thin

smile. "It's one of your many charms."

"We will rid?dle him four times to be?gin with," Roland said. "Easy, not so easy,

quite hard, very hard. He'll an?swer all four, of that I am con fi?dent, but we will be

lis?ten?ing for how he an?swers."

Ed?die was nod?ding, and Su?san?nah felt a small, al?most re?luc?tant glim mer of hope.

It sound?ed like the right ap?proach, all right.

"Then we'll send him away again and hold palaver," the gun?slinger said. "May?hap

we'll get an idea of what direction to send our horses. These first rides can come

from anywhere, but"—he nodded gravely toward the book—"based on Jake's story

of the bookstore, the answer we really need should be in there, not in any

memories I have of Fair-Day rides. Must be in there."

"Question," Susanah said.

Roland looked at her, eyebrows raised over his faded, dangerous eyes.

"It's a question we're looking for, not an answer," she said. "This time it's the

answers that are apt to get us killed."

The gunslinger nodded. He looked puzzled—frustrated, even—and this was not an

expression Susanah liked seeing on his face. But this time when Jake held out the

book, Roland took it. He held it for a moment (its faded but still gay red cover

looked very strange in his big sunburned hands . . . especially in the right one,

with its essential reduction of two fingers), then passed it on to Edie.

"You're easy," Roland said, turning to Susanah.

"Perhaps," she replied, with a trace of a smile, "but it's still not a very polite thing

to say to a lady, Roland."

He turned to Jake. "You'll go second, with one that's a little harder. I'll go third.

You'll go last, Edie. Pick one from the book that looks hard—"

"The hard ones are toward the back," Jake supplied.

". . . but none of your foolishness, mind. This is life and death. The time for

foolishness is past."

Edie looked at him—old long, tall, and ugly, who'd done God knew how many

ugly things in the name of reaching his Tower—and wondered if Roland had any

idea at all of how much that hurt. Just that casual admission not to behave like a

child, grinning and cracking jokes, now that their lives were at wafer.

He opened his mouth to say something—an Edie Dean Special, something that

would be both funny and stinging at the same time, the kind

of re?mark that al?ways

used to drive his broth?er Hen?ry dogshit— and then closed it again. Maybe long,

tall, and ug?ly was right; maybe it was time to put away the one-?lin?ers and dead

ba?by jokes. Maybe it was fi?nal?ly time to grow up.

3

Af?ter three more min?utes of mur?mured con?sul?ta?tion and some quick flip ping

through Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! on Ed?die's and Su?san?nah's parts (Jake al ready knew the

one he want?ed to try Blaine with first, he'd said), Roland went to the front of the

Barony Coach and laid his hand on the fierce?ly glow?ing rect?an?gle there. The route-

map reap?peared at once. Al?though there was no sen?sa?tion of move?ment now that

the coach was closed, the green dot was clos?er to Rilea than ev?er.

“SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN!” Blaine said. To Ed?die he sound?ed more than

jovial; he sound?ed next door to hi?lar?ious. “IS YOUR KA-?TET READY TO

BE?GIN?”

“Yes. Su?san?nah of New York will be?gin the first round.” He turned to her, low?ered

his voice a lit?tle (not that she reck?oned that would do much good if Blaine want?ed

to lis?ten), and said: “You won't have to step for ward like the rest of us, be?cause of

your legs, but you must speak fair and ad?dress him by name each time you talk to

him. If—when—he an?svers your rid?dle cor?rect?ly, say ‘Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you

have an?swered true.’ Then Jake will step in?to the aisle and have his turn. All

right?”

“And if he should get it wrong, or not guess at all?”

Roland smiled grim?ly. “I think that's one thing we don't have to wor?ry about just

yet.” He raised his voice again. “Blaine?”

“YES, GUN?SLINGER.”

Roland took a deep breath. “It starts now.”

“EX?CEL?LENT!”

Roland nod?ded at Su?san?nah. Ed?die squeezed one of her

hands; Jake pat?ted the

oth?er. Oy gazed at her rapt?ly with his gold-?ringed eyes.

Su?san?nah smiled at them ner?vous?ly, then looked up at the route-?map. "Hel?lo, Blame."

"HOWDY, SU?SAN?NAH OF NEW YORK."

Her heart was pound?ing, her armpits were damp, and here was some thing she had

first dis?cov?ered way back in the first grade: it was hard to be?gin. It was hard to

stand up in front of the class and be first with your song, your joke, your re?port on

how you spent your sum?mer va?ca?tion . . . or your rid?dle, for that mat?ter. The one

she had de?cid?ed up?on was one from Jake Cham?bers's crazed En?glish es?say, which

he had re?cit?ed to them al?most ver?ba?tim dur?ing their long palaver af?ter leav?ing the

old peo?ple of Riv?er Cross?ing. The es?say, ti?tled "My Un?der?stand?ing of Truth," had

con tained two rid?dles, one of which Ed?die had al?ready used on Blaine.

"SU?SAN?NAH? ARE YOU THERE, L'IL COW?GIRL?"

Teas?ing again, but this time the teas?ing sound?ed light, good-?na?tured. Good-

hu?mored. Blaine could be charm?ing when he got what he want?ed. Like cer?tain

spoiled chil?dren she had known.

"Yes, Blaine, I am, and here is my rid?dle. What has four wheels and flies?"

There was a pe?cu?liar click, as if Blaine were mim?ick?ing the sound of a man

pop?ping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was fol?lowed by a brief pause.

When Blaine replied, most of the joc?ular?ity had gone out of his voice. "THE

TOWN GARBAGE WAG?ON, OF COURSE. A CHILD'S RID?DLE. IF THE

REST OF YOUR RID?DLES ARE NO BET TER, I WILL BE EX?TREME?LY

SOR?RY I SAVED YOUR LIVES FOR EVEN A SHORT WHILE."

The route-?map flashed, not red this time but pale pink. "Don't get him mad," the

voice of Lit?tle Blaine begged. Each time it spoke, Su?san?nah found her?self

imagining a sweaty little bald man whose every movement was a kind of cringe.

The voice of Big Blaine came from everywhere (like the voice of God in a Cecil

B. DeMille movie, Susanah thought), but Little Blaine's from only one: the

speaker directly over their heads. "Please don't make him angry, fellows; he's

already got the mono in the red, speedwise, and the track competitors can barely

keep up. The trackage has degenerated terribly since the last time we came out this

way."

Susanah, who had been on her share of humpy trolleys and subways in her time,

felt nothing the ride was as smooth now as it had been when they had first pulled

out of the Cradle of Lud—but she believed Little Blaine anyway. She guessed that

if they did feel a bump, it would be the last thing any of them would ever feel.

Roland poked an elbow into her side, bringing her back to her current situation.

"Thankee-sai," she said, and then, as an afterthought, tapped her throat rapidly

three times with the fingers of her right hand. It was what Roland had done when

speaking to Aunt Talitha for the first time.

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR COURTESY," Blaine said. He sounded amused

again, and Susanah reckoned that was good even if his amusement was at her

expense. "I AM NOT FEMALE, HOWEVER. IN SO FAR AS I HAVE A SEX, IT

IS MALE."

Susanah looked at Roland, bewildered.

"Left hand for men," he said. "On the breastbone." He tapped to demonstrate.

"Oh."

Roland turned to Jake. The boy stood, put Oy on his chair (which did no good; Oy

immediately jumped down and followed after Jake when he stepped into the aisle

to face the route-map), and turned his attention to Blaine.

"Hello, Blaine, this is Jake. You know, son of Elmer."

“SPEAK YOUR RID?DLE.”

“What can run but nev?er walks, has a mouth but nev?er talks,
has a bed but nev?er

sleeps, has a head but nev?er weeps?”

“NOT BAD! ONE HOPES SU?SAN?NAH WILL LEARN FROM
YOUR

EX?AM?PLE, JAKE SON OF ELMER. THE AN?SWER MUST BE
SELF-

EV?IDENT TO ANY?ONE OF ANY IN?TEL?LI?GENCE AT ALL,
BUT A DE?CENT

EF?FORT, NEV?ER?THE?LESS. A RIV?ER.”

“Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you have an?swered true.” He tapped the
bunched fin?gers of

his left hand three times against his breast?bone and then sat
down. Su?san?nah put

her arm around him and gave him a brief squeeze. Jake looked
at her grate?ful?ly.

Now Roland stood up. “Hile, Blaine,” he said.

“HILE, GUN?SLINGER.” Once again Blaine sound?ed amused . . .
pos?si?bly by the

greet?ing, which Su?san?nah hadn’t heard be?fore. Heil what?
she won?dered. Hitler

came to mind, and that made her think of the downed plane
they’d found out?side

Lud. A Focke-?Wulf, Jake had claimed. She didn’t know about
that, but she knew it

had con?tained one se?ri?ous?ly dead har?ri?er, too old even to
stink. “SPEAK YOUR

RID?DLE, ROLAND, AND LET IT BE HAND?SOME.”

“Hand?some is as hand?some does, Blaine. In any case, here it
is: What has four legs

in the morn?ing, two legs in the af?ter?noon, and three legs at
night?”

“THAT IS IN?DEED HAND?SOME,” Blaine al?lowed. “SIM?PLE
BUT

HAND?SOME, JUST THE SAME. THE AN?SWER IS A HU?MAN
BE ING,

WHO CRAWLS ON HANDS AND KNEES IN BABY?HOOD,
WALKS ON

TWO LEGS DUR?ING ADULT?HOOD, AND WHO GOES ABOUT
WITH THE

HELP OF A CANE IN OLD AGE.”

Blaine sound?ed pos?itive?ly smug, and Su?san?nah sud?den?ly
dis?cov?ered a mild?ly

in?ter?est?ing fact: she loathed the self-?sat?is?fied, mur?der?

ous thing. Ma?chine or not, it

or he, she loathed Blaine. She had an idea she would have felt the same even if he

hadn't made them wa?ger their lives in a stu pid rid?dling con?test.

Roland, how?ev?er, did not look the slight?est put out of coun?te?nance. "Thankee-?sai,

Blaine, you have an?swered true." He sat down with?out tap ping his breast?bone and

looked at Ed?die. Ed?die stood up and stepped in?to the aisle.

"What's hap?pen?ing, Blaine my man?" he asked. Roland winced and shook his

head, putting his mu?ti?lat?ed right hand up briefly to shade his eyes.

Si?lence from Blaine.

"Blaine? Are you there?"

"YES, BUT IN NO MOOD FOR FRIVOLI?TY, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK. SPEAK

YOUR RID?DLE. I SUS?PECT IT WILL BE DIF?FI CULT IN SPITE OF YOUR

FOOL?ISH POS?ES. I LOOK FOR?WARD TO IT."

Ed?die glanced at Roland, who waved a hand at him—Go on, for your fa?ther's

sake, go on!—and then looked back at the route-?map, where the green dot had just

passed the point marked Rilea. Su?san?nah saw that Ed?die sus?pect?ed what she

her?self all but knew: Blaine un?der?stood they were try?ing to test his ca?pa?bil?ities

with a spec?trum of rid?dles. Blaine knew . . . and wel?comed it.

Su?san?nah felt her heart sink as any hopes they might find a quick and easy way

out of this dis?ap?peared.

4

"Well," Ed?die said, "I don't know how hard it'll seem to you, but it struck me as a

toughie." Nor did he know the an?swer, since that sec?tion of Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! had

been torn out, but he didn't think that made any dif?fer?ence; their know?ing the

an?swers hadn't been part of the ground-?rules.

"I SHALL HEAR AND AN?SWER."

"No soon?er spo?ken than bro?ken. What is it?"

"SI?LENCE, A THING YOU KNOW LIT?TLE ABOUT, ED?DIE OF NEW

YORK,” Blaine said with no pause at all, and Ed?die felt his heart drop a lit?tle.

There was no need to con?sult with the oth?ers; the an?swer was self-ev?ident. And

hav?ing it come back at him so quick?ly was the re?al bum?mer. Ed?die nev?er would

have said so, but he had har?bored the hope— al?most a se?cret sure?ty—of bring?ing

Blaine down with a sin?gle rid?dle, ker-?smash, all the King’s hors?es and all the

King’s men couldn’t put Blaine to?geth?er again. The same se?cret sure?ty, he

sup?posed, that he had har?bored ev?ery time he picked up a pair of dice in some

sharpie’s back-?bed?room crap game, ev?ery time he called for a hit on sev?en?teen

while play?ing black?jack. That feel?ing that you couldn’t go wrong be?cause you

were you, the best, the one and on?ly.

“Yeah,” he said, sigh?ing. “Si?lence, a thing I know lit?tle about. Thankee-?sai, Blaine,

you speak truth.”

“I HOPE YOU HAVE DIS?COV?ERED SOME?THING WHICH WILL HELP

YOU,” Blaine said, and Ed?die thought: You fuck?ing me?chan?ical liar. The

com?pla?cent tone had re?turned to Blaine’s voice, and Ed?die found it of some

pass?ing in?ter?est that a ma?chine could ex?press such a range of emo tion. Had the

Great Old Ones built them in, or had Blaine cre?at?ed an emo tion?al rain?bow for

him?self at some point? A lit?tle dipo?lar pret?ty with which to pass the long decades

and cen?turies? “DO YOU WISH ME TO GO AWAY AGAIN SO YOU MAY

CON?SULT?”

“Yes,” Roland said.

The route-?map flashed bright red. Ed?die turned to?ward the gun?slinger. Roland

com?posed his face quick?ly, but be?fore he did, Ed?die saw a hor ri?ble thing: a brief

look of com?plete hope?less?ness. Ed?die had nev?er seen such a look there be?fore, not

when Roland had been dy?ing of the lob?strosi?ties’ bites, not

when Ed?die had been

point?ing the gun?slinger's own re?volver at him, not even when the hideous Gash?er

had tak?en Jake pris on?er and dis?ap?peared in?to Lud with him.

"What do we do next?" Jake asked. "Do an?oth?er round of the four of us?"

"I think that would serve lit?tle pur?pose," Roland said. "Blame must know

thou?sands of rid?dles—per?haps mil?lions—and that is bad. Worse, far worse, he

un?der?stands the how of rid?dling ... the place the mind has to go to in or?der to make

them and solve them." He turned to Ed?die and Su?san?nah, sit?ting once more with

their arms about one an?oth?er. "Am I right about that?" he asked them. "Do you

agree?"

"Yes," Su?san?nah said, and Ed?die nod?ded re?luc?tant?ly. He didn't want to agree . . .

but he did.

"So?" Jake asked. "What do we do, Roland? I mean, there has to be a way out of

this . . . doesn't there?"

Lie to him, you bas?tard, Ed?die sent fierce?ly in Roland's di?rec?tion. Roland, per?haps

hear?ing the thought, did the best he could. He touched Jake's hair with his

di?min?ished hand and ruf?fled through it. "I think there's al?ways an an?swer, Jake.

The re?al ques?tion is whether or not we'll have time to find the right rid?dle. He said

it took him a lit?tle un?der nine hours to run his route—"

"Eight hours, forty-?five min?utes," Jake put in. ". . . and that's not much time.

We've al?ready been run?ning al?most an hour—"

"And if that map's right, we're al?most halfway to Tope?ka," Su?san?nah said in a tight

voice. "Could be our me?chan?ical pal's been ly?ing to us about the length of the run.

Hedg?ing his bets a lit?tle." "Could be," Roland agreed. "So what do we do?" Jake

re?peat?ed.

Roland drew in a deep breath, held it, let it out. "Let me rid?dle him alone, for now.

I'll ask him the hardest ones I remember from the Fair-Days of my youth. Then,

Jake, if we're approaching the point of... if we're approaching Topeka at this same

speed with Blaine still unposed, I think you should ask him the last few rides in

your book. The hardest rides." He rubbed the side of his face distractedly and

looked at the ice sculpture. This chilly rendering of his own likeness had now

melted to an unrecognizable hulk. "I still think the answer must be in the book.

Why else would you have been drawn to it before coming back to this world?"

"And us?" Susanah asked. "What do Ed die and I do?"

"Think," Roland said. "Think, for your fathers' sakes."

"I do not shoot with my hand," Ed die said. He suddenly felt far away, strange to

himself. It was the way he'd felt when he had seen first the sling-shot and then the

key in pieces of wood, just waiting for him to whittle them free ... and at the same

time this feeling was not like that at all.

Roland was looking at him oddly. "Yes, Ed die, you say true. A gun-slinger shoots

with his mind. What have you thought of?"

"Nothing." He might have said more, but all at once a strange image—a strange

memory—intruded: Roland hunting by Jake at one of their stopping-points on

the way to Lud. Both of them in front of an unlit campfire. Roland once more at

his everlasting lessons. Jake's turn this time. Jake with the flint and steel, trying to

quicken the fire. Spark after spark licking out and dying in the dark. And Roland

had said that he was being silly. That he was just being . . . well. . . silly.

"No," Ed die said. "He didn't say that at all. At least not to the kid, he didn't."

"Ed die?" Susanah. Sound ing con cerned. Almost frightened.

Well why don't you ask him what he said, bro? That was Henry's voice, the voice

of the Great Sage and Eminent Junkie. First time in a long time.

Ask him, he's

practically sitting right next to you, go on and ask him what he said. Quit dancing

around like a baby with a load in his diapers.

Except that was a bad idea, because that wasn't the way things worked in Roland's

world. In Roland's world everything was ridicles, you didn't shoot with your hand

but with your mind, your motherfucking mind, and what did you say to someone

who wasn't getting the spark into the kindling? Move your flint in closer, of

course, and that's what Roland had said: Move your flint in closer, and hold it

steady.

Except none of that was what this was about. It was close, yes, but close only

counts in horse-shoes, as Henry Dean had been wont to say before he became the

Great Sage and Eminent Junkie. Edie's memory was jinking a little because

Roland had embarrassed him... shamed him . . . made a joke at his expense . . .

Probably not on purpose, but... something. Something that had made him feel the

way Henry always used to make him feel, of course it was, why else would Henry

be here after such a long absence?

All of them looking at him now. Even Oy.

"Go on," he told Roland, sounding a little waspish. "You wanted us to think, we're

thinking, already." He himself was thinking so hard

(I shoot with my mind)

that his goddam brains were almost on fire, but he wasn't going to tell old long,

tall, and ugly that. "Go on and ask Blaine some ridicles. Do your part."

"As you will, Edie." Roland rose from his seat, went forward, and laid his hand

on the scarlet rectangle again. The route-map reappeared at once. The green dot

had moved farther beyond Rilea, but it was clear to Edie that the mono had

slowed down significantly, either obeying some built-in program or because

Blaine was hav'ing too much fun to hur'ry.

"IS YOUR KA-TET READY TO CON-TIN-UE OUR FAIR-DAY RID-DLING,

ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"Yes, Blaine," Roland said, and to Ed-die his voice sound'ed heavy. "I will rid-dle

you alone for awhile now. If you have no ob-jec-tion."

"AS DINH AND FA-THER OF YOUR KA-TET, SUCH IS YOUR RIGHT. WILL

THESE BE FAIR-DAY RID-DLES?"

"Yes."

"GOOD." Loath'some sat-is-fac-tion in that voice. "I WOULD HEAR MORE OF

THOSE."

"All right." Roland took a deep breath, then be-gan. "Feed me and I live. Give me

to drink and I die. What am I?"

"FIRE." No hes-ita-tion. On-ly that in-suf-fer-able smug-ness, a tone which said That

was old to me when your grand-moth'er was young, but try again! This is more fun

than I've had in cen-turies, so try again!

"I pass be-fore the sun, Blaine, yet make no shad-ow. What am I?"

"WIND." No hes-ita-tion.

"You speak true, sai. Next. This is as light as a feath'er, yet no man can hold it for

long."

"ONE'S BREATH." No hes-ita-tion.

Yet he did hes-itate, Ed-die thought sud-den-ly. Jake and Su-san-nah were watch-ing

Roland with ag-onized con-cen-tra-tion, fists clenched, will-ing him to ask Blaine the

right rid-dle, the stumper, the one with the Get the Fuck Out of Jail Free card

hid-den in-side it; Ed-die couldn't look at them—Suze, in par-tic-ular—and keep his

con-cen-tra-tion. He low-ered his gaze to his own hands, which were al-so clenched,

and forced them to open on his lap. It was sur-pris-ing-ly hard to do. From the aisle

he heard Roland con-tin-uing to trot out the gold-en oldies of his youth.

"Rid-dle me this, Blaine: If you break me, I'll not stop work-ing. If you can touch

me, my work is done. If you lose me, you must find me with a ring soon after.

What am I?"

Su?san?nah's breath caught for a moment, and although he was looking down, Ed?die

knew she was thinking what he was thinking: that was a good one, a damned good

one, maybe—

"THE HUMAN HEART," Blaine said. Still with not a whit of hesitation. "THIS

RIDDLE IS BASED IN LARGE PART UPON HUMAN POETIC CONCEPTS;

SEE FOR INSTANCE JOHN AVERY, SIRO?NIA HUNTZ, ONDOLA,

WILLIAM BLAKE, JAMES TATE, VERONICA MAYS, AND OTHERS. IT IS

REMARKABLE HOW HUMAN BEINGS PITCH THEIR MINDS ON LOVE.

YET IT IS CONSTANT FROM ONE LEVEL OF THE TOWER TO THE NEXT,

EVEN IN THESE DEGENERATE DAYS. CONTINUE, ROLAND OF

GILEAD."

Su?san?nah's breath resumed. Ed?die's hands wanted to clench again, but he wouldn't

let them. Move your flint in closer, he thought in Roland's voice. Move your flint

in closer, for your father's sake!

And Blaine the Mono ran on, southeast under the Demon Moon.

CHAPTER II

THE FALLS OF

THE HOUNDS

1

Jake didn't know how easy or difficult Blaine might find the last ten puzzles in

Riddle-De-Dum!, but they looked pretty tough to him. Of course, he remembered

himself, he wasn't a thinking-machine with a citywide bank of computers to draw

on. All he could do was go for it; God hates a coward, as Ed?die sometimes said.

If the last ten failed, he would try Aaron Deepneau's Samson riddle (Out of the

eater came forth meat, and so on). If that one also failed, he'd

probably . . . shit, he

didn't know what he'd do, or even how he'd feel. The truth is, Jake thought, I'm fried.

And why not? He had gone through an extraordinary swarm of emotions in the

last eight hours or so. First, terror: of being sure he and Oy were going to drop off

the suspension bridge and to their deaths in the River Send; of being driven

through the crazed maze that was Lud by Gasher; of having to look into the Tick-

Tock Man's terrible green eyes and try to answer his unanswerable questions about

time, Nazis, and the nature of transitive circuits. Being questioned by Tick-Tock

had been like having to take a final exam in hell.

Then the exhilaration of being rescued by Roland (and Oy; without Oy he would

almost certainly be toast now), the wonder of all they had seen beneath the city,

his awe at the way Susanah had solved Blaine's gate-riddle, and the final mad

rush to get aboard the mono before Blaine could release the stocks of nerve-gas

stored under Lud.

After surviving all that, a kind of blissed-out surety had settled over him—of

course Roland would stump Blaine, who would then keep his part of the bargain

and set them down safe and sound at his final stop (whatever passed for Topeka in

this world). Then they would find the Dark Tower and do whatever they were

supposed to do there, right what needed righting, fix what needed fixing. And

then? They Lived Happily Ever After, of course. Like folk in a fairy tale.

Except...

They shared each other's thoughts, Roland had said; sharing khaf was part of what

katet meant. And what had been seeping into Jake's thoughts ever since Roland

stepped into the aisle and began to try Blaine with riddles from his young days

was a sense of doom. It wasn't coming just from the gun-slinger; Su-san-nah was

sending out the same grim blue-black vibe. Only Ed-die wasn't sending it, and that

was because he'd gone off somewhere, was chasing his own thoughts. That might

be good, but there were no guarantees, and—

—and Jake began to be scared again. Worse, he felt desperate, like a creature that

is pressed deeper and deeper into its final corner by a relentless foe. His fingers

worked restlessly in Oy's fur, and when he looked down at them, he realized an

amazing thing: the hand which Oy had bitten to keep from falling off the

bridge no longer hurt. He could see the holes the bumblers' teeth had made, and

blood was still crusted in his palm and on his wrist, but the hand itself no longer

hurt. He flexed it cautiously. There was some pain, but it was low and distant,

hardly there at all.

"Blaine, what may go up a chimney down but cannot go down a chimney up?"

"A LADY'S PARASOL," Blaine replied in that tone of jolly composure which

Jake, too, was coming to loathe.

"Thankee-sai, Blaine, once again you have answered true. Next—"

"Roland?"

The gunslinger looked around at Jake, and his look of concentration lightened a

bit. It wasn't a smile, but it went a little way in that direction, at least, and Jake was

glad.

"What is it, Jake?"

"My hand. It was hurting like crazy, and now it's stopped!"

"SHUCKS," Blaine said in the drawling voice of John Wayne. "I COULDN'T

WATCH A HOUND SUFFER WITH A MASHED-UP FOREPAW LIKE THAT,

LET ALONE A FINE LITTLE TRAIL HAND LIKE YOURSELF. SO I FIXED

IT UP."

"How?" Jake asked.

“LOOK ON THE ARM OF YOUR SEAT.”

Jake did, and saw a faint grid?work of lines. It looked a lit?tle like the speak?er of the

tran?sis?tor ra?dio he’d had when he was sev?en or eight.

“AN?OTH?ER BEN?EFIT OF TRAV?EL?LING BARONY CLASS,” Blaine went on

in his smug voice. It crossed Jake’s mind that Blaine would fit in per?fect?ly at the

Piper School. The world’s first slo?-?trans, dipolar nerd. “THE HAND?-?SCAN

SPEC?TRUM MAG?NI?FI?ER IS A DI?AGNOS?TIC TOOL AL?SO CA?PA?BLE OF

AD?MIN?IS?TER?ING MI?NOR FIRST AID, SUCH AS I HAVE PER?FORMED ON

YOU. IT IS AL?SO A NU?TRI?ENT DE?LIV?ERY SYS?TEM, A BRAIN?-?PAT?TERN

RECORD?ING DE?VICE, A STRESS?-?AN?ALYZ?ER, AND AN EMO?TION-

EN?HANCER WHICH CAN NAT?URAL?LY STIM?ULATE THE PRO?DUCTION

OF EN?DOR?PHINS. HAND?-?SCAN IS AL?SO CA?PA?BLE OF CRE?AT?ING VERY

BE?LIEV?ABLE IL?LU?SIONS AND HAL?LU?CI?NA?TIONS. WOULD YOU CARE

TO HAVE YOUR FIRST SEX?UAL EX?PE?RI?ENCE WITH A NOT?ED SEX-

GOD?DESS FROM YOUR LEV?EL OF THE TOW?ER, JAKE OF NEW YORK?

PER?HAPS MAR?ILYN MON?ROE, RAQUEL WELCH, OR EDITH BUNKER?”

Jake laughed. He guessed that laugh?ing at Blaine might be risky, but this time he

just couldn’t help it. “There is no Edith Bunker,” he said. “She’s just a char?ac?ter on

a TV show. The ac?tress’s name is, um, Jean Sta?ple?ton. Al?so, she looks like Mrs.

Shaw. She’s our house?keep?er. Nice, but not—you know—a babe.”

A long si?lence from Blaine. When the voice of the com?put?er re?turned, a cer?tain

cold?ness had re?placed the jo?cose ain’t-?we-?hav?ing-?fun tone of voice.

”I CRY YOUR PAR?DON, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I AL?SO WITH DRAW MY

OF?FER OF A SEX?UAL EX?PE?RI?ENCE.”

That'll teach me, Jake thought, rais'ing one hand to cov'er a smile. Aloud (and in

what he hoped was a suit'ably hum'ble tone of voice) he said:

"That's okay, Blaine. I think I'm still a lit'tle young for that, any'way."

Su'san'nah and Roland were look'ing at each oth'er. Su'san'nah didn't know who Edith

Bunker was—All in the Fam'ily hadn't been on the tube in her when. But she

grasped the essence of the sit'ua'tion just the same;

Jake saw her full lips form one sound'less word and send it to the gun-'slinger like a

mes'sage in a soap bub'ble:

Mis'take.

Yes. Blaine had made a mis'take. More, Jake Cham'bers, a boy of eleven, had

picked up on it. And if Blaine had made one, he could make an' oth'er. Maybe there

was hope af'ter all. Jake de'cid'ed he would treat that pos'si'bility as he had treat'ed

the graf of Riv'er Cross'ing and al'low him'self just a lit'tle.

2

Roland nod'ded im'per'cep'ti'bly at Su'san'nah, then turned back to the front of the

coach, pre'sum'ably to re'sume rid'dling. Be'fore he could open his mouth, Jake felt

his body pushed for'ward. It was fun'ny; you couldn't feel a thing when the mono

was run'ning flat-'out, but the minute it be'gan to de cel'er'ate, you knew.

"HERE IS SOME'THING YOU RE?AL?LY OUGHT TO SEE," Blaine said. He

sound'ed cheer'ful again, but Jake didn't trust that tone; he had some'times heard his

fa'ther start tele'phone con'ver'sa'tions that way (usu al'ly with some sub'or'di'nate who

had FUB, Fucked Up Big), and by the end Elmer Cham'bers would be up on his

feet, bent over the desk like a man with a stom'ach cramp and scream'ing at the top

of his lungs, his cheeks red as radish'es and the cir'cles of flesh un'der his eyes as

pur'ple as an egg'plant. "I HAVE TO STOP HERE, ANY'WAY, AS I MUST

SWITCH TO BAT'TERY POW'ER AT THIS POINT AND THAT

MEANS PRE-

CHARG?ING.”

The mono stopped with a bare?ly per?cep?ti?ble jerk. The walls around them once

more drained of col?or and then be?came trans?par?ent. Susan?nah gasped with fear

and won?der. Roland moved to his left, felt for the side of the coach so he wouldn’t

bump his head, then leaned for?ward with his hands on his knees and his eyes

nar?rowed. Oy be?gan to bark again. On?ly Ed?die seemed un?moved by the

breath?tak?ing view which had been pro vid?ed them by the Barony Coach’s vi?su?al

mode. He glanced around once, face pre?oc?cu?ped and some?how bleary with

thought, and then looked down at his hands again. Jake glanced at him with brief

cu?rios?ity, then stared back out.

They were halfway across a vast chasm and seemed to be hov?er?ing on the moon-

dust?ed air. Be?yond them Jake could see a wide, boil?ing riv?er. Not the Send, un?less

the rivers in Roland’s world were some?how able to run in dif?fer?ent di?rec?tions at

dif?fer?ent points in their cours?es (and Jake didn’t know enough about Mid?-World to

en?tire?ly dis?count that pos?si bil?ity); al?so, this riv?er was not placid but rag?ing, a

tor?rent that came tum?bling out of the moun?tains like some?thing that was pissed off

and want?ed to brawl.

For a mo?ment Jake looked at the trees which dressed the steep slopes along the

sides of this riv?er, reg?is?ter?ing with re?lief that they looked pret?ty much all

right—the sort of firs you’d ex?pect to see in the moun?tains of Col?orado or

Wyoming, say—and then his eyes were dragged back to the lip of the chasm. Here

the tor?rent broke apart and dropped in a wa?ter?fall so wide and so deep that Jake

thought it made Ni?agara, where he had gone with his par?ents (one of three fam?ily

va?ca?tions he could re?mem?ber; two had been cut short by

ur?gent calls from his

fa?ther's Net?work), look like the kind you might see in a third-
rate theme-?park. The

air fill?ing the en clos?ing semi?cir?cle of the falls was fur?ther
thick?ened by an up

rush?ing mist that looked like steam; in it half a dozen moon?
bows gleamed like

gaudy, in?ter?lock?ing dream-?jew?el?ry. To Jake they looked
like the over?lap?ping rings

which sym?bol?ized the Olympics.

Jut?ting from the cen?ter of the falls, per?haps two hun?dred
feet be?low the point

where the riv?er ac?tu?al?ly went over the drop, were two enor?
mous stone pro?tru?sions.

Al?though Jake had no idea how a sculp?tor (or a team of them)
could have got?ten

down to where they were, he found it all but im pos?si?ble to
be?lieve they had

sim?ply erod?ed that way. They looked like the heads of enor?
mous, snarling dogs.

The Falls of the Hounds, he thought. There was one more stop
be yond

this—Dash?erville—and then Tope?ka. Last stop. Ev?ery?body
out.

“ONE MO?MENT,” Blaine said. “I MUST AD?JUST THE VOL?
UME FOR YOU

TO EN?JOY THE FULL EF?FECT.”

There was a brief, whis?pery hoot?ing sound—a kind of me?
chan?ical throat

clear?ing—and then they were as?sault?ed by a vast roar. It was
wa ter—a bil?lion

gal?lons a minute, for all Jake knew—pour?ing over the lip of
the chasm and falling

per?haps two thou?sand feet in?to the deep stone basin at the
base of the falls.

Stream?ers of mist float?ed past the blunt al?most-?faces of the
jut?ting dogs like steam

from the vents of hell. The lev?el of sound kept climb?ing. Now
Jake's whole head

vi?brat?ed with it, and as he clapped his hands over his ears, he
saw Roland, Ed?die,

and Su?san?nah do ing the same. Oy was bark?ing, but Jake
couldn't hear him.

Su?san?nah's lips were mov?ing again, and again he could read
the words—Stop it,

Blaine, stop it!—but he couldn't hear them any more than he could hear Oy's

barks, although he was sure Su?san?nah was scream?ing at the top of her lungs.

And still Blaine increased the sound of the wa?ter?fall, until Jake could feel his eyes

shak?ing in their sock?ets and he was sure his ears were go?ing to short out like

over?stressed stereo speak?ers.

Then it was over. They still hung above the moon-?misty drop, the moon?bows still

made their slow and dream?like rev?olu?tions be?fore the curtain of end?less?ly falling

wa?ter, the wet and bru?tal stone faces of the dog-?guardians con?tin?ued to jut out of

the tor?rent, but that world-?end?ing thun?der was gone.

For a mo?ment Jake thought what he'd feared had hap?pened, that he had gone deaf.

Then he re?al?ized that he could hear Oy, still bark?ing, and Su?san?nah cry?ing. At first

these sounds seemed dis?tant and flat, as if his ears had been packed with crack?er-

crumbs, but then they be?gan to clar?ify.

Ed?die put his arm around Su?san?nah's shoul?ders and looked to?ward the route-?map.

"Nice guy, Blaine."

"I MERE?LY THOUGHT YOU WOULD EN?JOY HEAR?ING THE SOUND OF

THE FALLS AT FULL VOL?UME," Blaine said. His boom ing voice sound?ed

laugh?ing and in?jured at the same time. "I THOUGHT IT MIGHT HELP YOU TO

FOR?GET MY RE?GRET?TABLE MIS?TAKE IN THE MAT?TER OF EDITH

BUNKER."

My fault, Jake thought. Blaine may just be a ma?chine, and a sui?ci?dal one at that,

but he still doesn't like to be laughed at.

He sat be?side Su?san?nah and put his own arm around her. He could still hear the

Falls of the Hounds, but the sound was now dis?tant.

"What hap?pens here?" Roland asked. "How do you charge your bat?ter?ies?"

"YOU WILL SEE SHORT?LY, GUN?SLINGER. IN THE MEAN TIME, TRY ME

WITH A RID?DLE.”

“All right, Blaine. Here’s one of Cort’s own mak?ing, and has posed many in its time.”

“I AWAIT IT WITH GREAT IN?TER?EST.”

Roland, paus?ing per?haps to gath?er his thoughts, looked up at the place where the

roof of the coach had been and where there was now on?ly a star?ry spill across a

black sky (Jake could pick out Aton and Ly?dia—Old Star and Old Moth?er—and

was odd?ly com?fort?ed by the sight of them, still glar?ing at each oth?er from their

ac?cus?tomed places). Then the gun?slinger looked back at the light?ed rect?an?gle

which served them as Blaine’s face.

“ ‘We are very lit?tle crea?tures; all of us have dif?fer?ent fea?tures. One of us in glass

is set; one of us you’ll find in jet. An?oth?er you may see in tin, and a fourth is boxed

with?in. If the fifth you should pur?sue, it can nev?er fly from you. What are we?’ ”

“A AND E AND I AND O AND U,” Blaine replied. “THE VOW?ELS OF THE

HIGH SPEECH.” Still no hes?ita?tion, not so much as a whit. On?ly that voice,

mock?ing and just about two steps from laugh?ter; the voice of a cru?el lit?tle boy

watch?ing bugs run around on top of a hot stove. “AL?THOUGH THAT

PAR?TIC?ULAR RID?DLE IS NOT FROM YOUR TEACH?ER, ROLAND OF

GILEAD; I KNOW IT FROM JONATHAN SWIFT OF LON?DON—A CITY IN

THE WORLD YOUR FRIENDS COME FROM.”

“Thankee?sai,” Roland said, and his sai sound?ed like a sigh. “Your an?swer is true,

Blaine, and un?doubt?ed?ly what you be?lieve of the rid?dle’s ori?gins is true as well.

That Cort knew of oth?er worlds is some?thing I long sus?pect?ed. I think he may have

held palaver with the man?ni who lived out?side the city.”

“I CARE NOT ABOUT THE MAN?NI, ROLAND OF GILEAD. THEY WERE

AL?WAYS A FOOL?ISH SECT. TRY ME WITH AN OTH?ER RID?

DLE.”

“All right. What has—”

“HOLD, HOLD. THE FORCE OF THE BEAM GATH?ERS. LOOK NOT

DI?RECT?LY AT THE HOUNDS, MY IN?TER?EST?ING NEW FRIENDS! AND

SHIELD YOUR EYES!“

Jake looked away from the colos?sal rock sculp?tures jut?ting from the falls, but

didn’t get his hand up quite in time. With his pe?riph?er?al vi?sion he saw those

fea?ture?less heads sud?den?ly de?vel?op eyes of a fierce?ly glow ing blue. Jagged tines

of light?ning leaped out of them and to?ward the mono. Then Jake was ly?ing on the

car?pet?ed floor of the Barony Coach with the heels of his hands past?ed against his

closed eyes and the sound of Oy whin?ing in one faint?ly ring?ing ear. Be?yond Oy, he

heard the crack?le of elec?tric?ity as it stormed around the mono.

When Jake opened his eyes again, the Falls of the Hounds were gone;

Blaine had opaqued the cab?in. He could still hear the sound, though—a wa?ter?fall

of elec?tric?ity, a force some?how drawn from the Beam and shot out through the

eyes of the stone heads. Blaine was feed?ing him?self with it, some?how. When we go

on, Jake thought, he ‘II be run?ning on bat?ter?ies. Then Lud re?al?ly will be be?hind us.

For good.

”Blaine,” Roland said. ”How is the pow?er of the Beam stored in that place? What

makes it come from the eyes of yon stone tem?ple?-dogs? How do you use it?“

Si?lence from Blaine.

”And who carved them?“ Ed?die asked. ”Was it the Great Old Ones? It wasn’t, was

it? There were peo?ple even be?fore them. Or ... were they peo?ple?“

More si?lence from Blaine. And maybe that was good. Jake wasn’t sure how much

he want?ed to know about the Falls of the Hounds, or what went on be?neath them.

He had been in the dark of Roland's world before, and had seen enough to believe

that most of what was growing there was neither good nor safe.

"Better not to ask him," the voice of Little Blaine drifted down from over their

heads. "Safer."

"Don't ask him silly questions, he won't play silly games," Eddie said. That distant,

dreaming look had come onto his face again, and when Susanah spoke his name,

he didn't seem to hear.

3

Roland sat down across from Jake and scrubbed his right hand slowly up the

stubble on his right cheek, an unconscious gesture he seemed to make only when

he was feeling tired or doubtful. "I'm running out of rides," he said.

Jake looked back at him, startled. The gunslinger had posed fifty or more to the

computer, and Jake supposed that was a lot to just yank out of your head with no

preparation, but when you considered that riding had been such a big deal in the

place where Roland had grown up ...

He seemed to read some of this on Jake's face, for a small smile, lemon-bitter,

touched the corners of his mouth, and he nodded as if the boy had spoken out loud.

"I don't understand, either. If you'd asked me yesterday or the day before, I would

have told you that I had at least a thousand rides stored up in the junkbin I keep

at the back of my mind. Perhaps two thousand. But. . ."

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, shook his head, rubbed his hand up his cheek

again.

"It's not like forgetting. It's as if they were never there in the first place. What's

happening to the rest of the world is happening to me, I reckon."

"You're moving on," Susanah said, and looked at Roland with an expression of

pity which Roland could look back at for only a second or

two; it was as if he felt

burned by her regard. "Like everything else here."

"Yes, I fear so." He looked at Jake, lips tight, eyes sharp. "Will you be ready with the rides from your book when I call on you?"

"Yes."

"Good. And take heart. We're not finished yet."

Outside, the dim crackle of electricity ceased.

"I HAVE FED MY BATTERIES AND ALL IS WELL," Blaine announced.

"Marvelous," Susanah said dryly.

"Luss!" Oy agreed, catching Susanah's sarcastic tone exactly.

"I HAVE A NUMBER OF SWITCHING FUNCTIONS TO PERFORM. THESE

WILL TAKE ABOUT FORTY MINUTES AND ARE LARGELY

AUTOOMATIC. WHILE THIS SWITCHOVER TAKES PLACE AND THE

ACCOMPANYING CHECKLIST IS RUNNING, WE SHALL CONTINUE OUR

CONTEST. I AM ENJOYING IT VERY MUCH."

"It's like when you have to switch over from electric to diesel on the train to

Boston," Edie said. He still sounded as if he wasn't quite with them. "At Hartford

or New Haven or one of those other places where no one in their right fucking mind would want to live."

"Edie?" Susanah asked. "What are you—"

Roland touched her shoulder and shook his head.

"NEVER MIND EDIE OF NEW YORK," Blaine said in his expansive, gosh-

but-this-is-fun voice.

"That's right," Edie said. "Never mind Edie of New York."

"HE KNOWS NO GOOD RIDES. BUT YOU KNOW MANY, ROLAND OF

GILEAD. TRY ME WITH ANOTHER."

And, as Roland did just that, Jake thought of his Final Essay. Blaine is a pain, he

had written there. Blaine is a pain and that is the truth. It was the truth, all right.

The stone truth.

A little less than an hour later, Blaine the Mono began to move again.

Su?san?nah watched with dread?ful fas?ci?na?tion as the flash?ing dot ap?proached

Dash?erville, passed it, and made its fi?nal dog?leg for home. The dot's move?ment

said that Blaine was mov?ing a bit more slow?ly now that it had switched over to

bat?ter?ies, and she fan?cied the lights in the Barony Coach were a lit?tle dim?mer, but

she didn't be?lieve it would make much dif?fer ence, in the end. Blaine might reach

his ter?mi?nus in Tope?ka do?ing six hun?dred miles an hour in?stead of eight hun?dred,

but his last load of pas sen?gers would be tooth?paste ei?ther way.

Roland was al?so slow?ing down, go?ing deep?er and deep?er in?to that men?tal junkbin

of his to find rid?dles. Yet he did find them, and he re?fused to give up. As al?ways.

Ev?er since he had be?gun teach?ing her to shoot, Su san?nah had felt a re?luc?tant love

for Roland of Gilead, a feel?ing that seemed a mix?ture of ad?mi?ra?tion, fear, and pity.

She thought she would nev?er re?al?ly like him (and that the Det?ta Walk?er part of her

might al?ways hate him for the way he had seized hold of her and dragged her,

rav?ing, in?to the sun), but her love was nonethe?less strong. He had, af?ter all, saved

Ed?die Dean's life and soul; had res?cued her beloved. She must love him for that if

for noth?ing else. But she loved him even more, she sus?pect?ed, for the way he

would nev?er, nev?er give up. The word re?treat didn't seem to be in his vo?cab?ulary,

even when he was dis?cour?aged ... as he so clear?ly was now.

"Blaine, where may you find roads with?out carts, forests with?out trees, cities

with?out hous?es?"

"ON A MAP."

"You say true, sai. Next. I have a hun?dred legs but can?not stand, a long neck but

no head; I eat the maid's life. What am I?"

"A BROOM, GUN?SLINGER. AN?OTH?ER VARI?ATION ENDS, 'I EASE THE

MAID'S LIFE.' I LIKE YOURS BET?TER."

Roland ignored this. "Can't be seen, can't be felt, can't be heard, can't be

smelt. It lies behind the stars and beneath the hills. Ends life and kills laughter.

What is it, Blaine?"

"THE DARK."

"Thankee-sai, you speak true."

The diminished right hand slid up the right cheek—the old fretful gesture—and

the minute scratching sound produced by the callused pads of his fingers made

Susanah shiver. Jake sat cross-legged on the floor, looking at the gun-slinger with

a kind of fierce intensity.

"This thing runs but can't walk, sometimes sings but never talks. Lacks arms,

has hands; lacks a head but has a face. What is it, Blaine?"

"A CLOCK."

"Shit," Jake whispered, lips compressing.

Susanah looked over at Eddie and felt a passing ripple of irritation. He seemed to

have lost interest in the whole thing—had "zoned out," in his weird 1980s slang.

She thought to throw an elbow into his side, wake him up a little, then

remembered Roland shaking his head at her and didn't. You wouldn't know he was

thinking, not from that slack expression on his face, but maybe he was.

If so, you better hurry it up a little, precious, she thought. The dot on the route

map was still closer to Dasherville than Topeka, but it would reach the halfway

point within the next fifteen minutes or so.

And still the match went on, Roland serving questions, Blaine sending the

answers whistling right back at him, low over the net and out of reach.

What builds up castles, tears down mountains, makes some blind, helps others to

see? SAND.

Thankee-sai.

What lives in winter, dies in summer, and grows with its roots upward? AN

ICICLE.

Blaine. you say true.

Man walks over; man walks un?der; in time of war he bums asun?der? A BRIDGE.

Thankee-?sai.

A seem?ing?ly end?less pa?rade of rid?dles marched past her, one af?ter the oth?er, un?til

she lost all sense of their fun and play?ful?ness. Had it been so in the days of

Roland's youth, she won?dered, dur?ing the rid?dle con?tests of Wide Earth and Full

Earth, when he and his friends (al?though she had an idea they hadn't all been his

friends, no, not by a long chalk) had vied for the Fair-?Day goose? She guessed that

the an?swer was prob?ably yes. The win?ner had prob?ably been the one who could

stay fresh longest, keep his poor blud?geoned brains aer?at?ed some?how.

The killer was the way Blaine came back with the an?swer so damned prompt?ly

each time. No mat?ter how hard the rid?dle might seem to her, Blaine served it right

back to their side of the court, ka-?slam.

"Blaine, what has eyes yet can?not see?"

"THERE ARE FOUR AN?SWERS," Blaine replied. "NEE?DLES, STORMS,

POTA?TOES, AND A TRUE LOVER."

"Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you speak—"

"LIS?TEN. ROLAND OF GILEAD. LIS?TEN, KA-?TET"

Roland fell silent at once, his eyes nar?row?ing, his head slight?ly cocked.

"YOU WILL SHORT?LY HEAR MY EN?GINES BE?GIN TO CY?CLE UP," Blaine

said. "WE ARE NOW EX?ACT?LY SIX?TY MIN?UTES OUT OF TOPE?KA. AT

THIS POINT—"

"If we've been rid?ing for sev?en hours or more, I grew up with the Brady Bunch,"

Jake said.

Su?san?nah looked around ap?pre?hen?sive?ly, ex?pect?ing some new ter?ror or small act

of cru?el?ty in re?sponse to Jake's sar?casm, but Blaine on?ly chuck led. When he

spoke again, the voice of Humphrey Bog?art had resur?faced.

"TIME'S DIF?FER?ENT HERE, SHWEET?HEART. YOU MUST

KNOW THAT

BY NOW. BUT DON'T WORRY; THE FUN DAMEN TAL THINGS
APPLY

AS TIME GOES BY. WOULD I LIE TO YOU?"

"Yes," Jake muttered.

That apparently struck Blaine's funny bone, because he began to laugh again—the

mad, melancholic laughter that made Susanah think of
funhouses in sleazy

amusement parks and roadside carnivals. When the lights
began to pulse in sync

with the laughter, she shut her eyes and put her hands over her
ears.

"Stop it, Blaine! Stop it!"

"BEGGON, MA'AM," drawled the aw-shucks voice of
Jimmy Stewart.

"AH'M RIGHT SORRY IF I RUIN YOUR EARS WITH MY
ABILITY."

"Ru'in this," Jake said, and hoisted his middle finger at the
route-map.

Susanah expected Edie to laugh—you could count on
him to be amused by

vulgarity at any time of the day or night, she would have said
—but Edie on

continued looking down at his lap, his forehead creased, his
eyes vacant, his

mouth hung slightly agape. He looked a little too much like
the village idiot for

comfort, Susanah thought, and again had to restrain her
self from throwing an

elbow in to his side to get that doltish look off his face. She
wouldn't restrain

herself for much longer; if they were going to die at the end of
Blaine's run, she

wanted Edie's arms around her when it happened, Edie's
eyes on her, Edie's

mind with hers.

But for now, better let him be.

"AT THIS POINT," Blaine resumed in his normal voice, "I
INTEND TO BEGIN

WHAT I LIKE TO THINK OF AS MY KAMIKAZE RUN. THIS WILL
QUICKLY DRAIN MY BATTERIES, BUT I THINK THE TIME
FOR

CONSERVATION HAS PASSED, DON'T YOU? WHEN I
STRIKE THE

TRANSTEEL PERS AT THE END OF THE TRACK, I SHOULD BE
TRAV?EL?LING AT BET?TER THAN NINE HUN?DRED MILES
AN

HOUR—FIVE HUN?DRED AND THIR?TY IN WHEELS, THAT IS.
SEE YOU

LAT?ER, AL?LI?GA?TOR, AF?TER AWHILE, CRO?CO DILE,
DON'T FOR?GET TO

WRITE. I TELL YOU THIS IN THE SPIR?IT OF FAIR PLAY, MY
IN?TER?EST?ING NEW FRIENDS. IF YOU HAVE BEEN SAV?ING
YOUR BEST

RID?DLES FOR LAST, YOU MIGHT DO WELL TO POSE THEM
TO ME

NOW.”

The un?mis?tak?able greed in Blaine’s voice—its naked de?sire
to hear and solve their

best rid?dles be?fore it killed them—made Su?san?nah feel tired
and old.

“I might not have time even so to pose you all my very best
ones,” Roland said in

a ca?sual, con?sid?er?ing tone of voice. “That would be a
shame, wouldn’t it?”

A pause en?sued—brief, but more of a hes?ita?tion than the
com?put?er had ac?cord?ed

any of Roland’s rid?dles—and then Blaine chuck?led. Su?san
nah hat?ed the sound of

its mad laugh?ter, but there was a cyn?ical weari?ness in this
chuck?le that chilled her

even more deeply. Per?haps be?cause it was al?most sane.

“GOOD, GUN?SLINGER. A VALIANT EF?FORT. BUT YOU ARE
NOT

SCHEHERAZADE, NOR DO WE HAVE A THOU?SAND AND ONE
NIGHTS

IN WHICH TO HOLD PALAVER.”

“I don’t un?der?stand you. I know not this Scheherazade.”

“NO MAT?TER. SU?SAN?NAH CAN FILL YOU IN, IF YOU RE?
AL?LY WANT

TO KNOW. PER?HAPS EVEN ED?DIE. THE POINT, ROLAND, IS
THAT I’LL

NOT BE DRAWN ON BY THE PROMISE OF MORE RID?DLES.
WE VIE FOR

THE GOOSE. COME TOPE?KA, IT SHALL BE AWARD?ED, ONE
WAY OR

AN?OTH?ER. DO YOU UN?DER?STAND THAT?”

Once more the di?min?ished hand went up Roland’s cheek; once
more Su?san?nah

heard the minute rasp of his fingers against the wiry stubble of his beard.

"We play for keeps. No one cries off."

"CORRECT. NO ONE CRIES OFF."

"All right, Blaine, we play for keeps and no one cries off. Here's the next."

"AS ALWAYS, I AWAIT IT WITH PLEASURE."

Roland looked down at Jake. "Be ready with yours, Jake; I'm almost at the end of mine."

Jake nodded.

Beneath them, the mono's engines continued to cycle up-mat beat-beat-

beat which Susanah did not so much hear as feel in the hinges of her jaw, the

hollows of her temples, the pulse-points of her wrists.

It's not going to happen unless there's a stumper in Jake's book, she thought.

Roland can't pose Blame, and I think he knows it. I think he knew it an hour ago.

"Blame, I occur once in a minute, twice in every moment, but not once in a

hundred thousand years. What am I?"

And so the contest would continue, Susanah realized, Roland asking and Blaine

answering with his increasing terrible lack of hesitation, like an all-seeing, all-

knowing god. Susanah sat with her cold hands clasped in her lap and watched the

glowing dot draw nigh Topeka, the place where all rail service ended, the place

where the path of their ka-tet would end in the clearing. She thought about the

Hounds of the Falls, how they had jutted from the thundering white billows below

the dark and starshot sky; she thought of their eyes.

Their electric-blue eyes.

CHAPTER III

the fair-day goose

1

Eddie Dean—who did not know Roland sometimes thought of him as ka mai, ka's

fool—heard all of it and heard none of it; saw all of it and saw none of it. The only

thing to really make an impression on him once the ride

dling be?gan in earnest was

the fire flash?ing from the stone eyes of the Hounds; as he raised his hand to shield

his eyes from that chain-?light?ning glare, he thought of the Por?tal of the Beam in

the Clear?ing of the Bear, how he had pressed his ear against it and heard the

dis?tant, dreamy rum?ble of ma?chin?ery.

Watch?ing the eyes of the Hounds light up, lis?ten?ing as Blaine drew that cur?rent

in?to his bat?ter?ies, pow?er?ing up for his fi?nal plunge across Mid-?World, Ed?die had

thought: Not all is silent in the halls of the dead and the rooms of ru?in. Even now

some of the stuff the Old Ones left be hind still works. And that's re?al?ly the hor?ror

of it, wouldn't 't you say? Yes. The ex?act hor?ror of it.

Ed?die had been with his friends for a short time af?ter that, men?tal?ly as well as

phys?ical?ly, but then he had fall?en back in?to his thoughts again. Ed?die's zonin.

Hen?ry would have said. Let 'im be.

It was the im?age of Jake strik?ing flint and steel that kept re?cur?ring; he would al?low

his mind to dwell on it for a sec?ond or two, like a bee alight ing on some sweet

flow?er, and then he would take off again. Be?cause that mem?ory wasn't what he

want?ed; it was just the way in to what he want?ed, an?oth?er door like the ones on the

beach of the West?ern Sea, or the one he had scraped in the dirt of the speak?ing ring

be?fore they had drawn Jake.. . on?ly this door was in his mind. What he want?ed was

be?hind it; what he was do?ing was kind of... well... did?dling the lock.

Zon?ing, in Hen?ry-?speak.

His broth?er had spent most of his time putting Ed?die down—be?cause Hen?ry had

been afraid of him and jeal?ous of him, Ed?die had fi?nal?ly come to re?al?ize—but he

re?mem?bered one day when Hen?ry had stunned him by say?ing some?thing that was

nice. Bet?ter than nice, ac?tu?al?ly; mind-?bog?gling.

A bunch of them had been sit?ting in the al?ley be?hind

Dahlie's, some of them eat?ing

Pop?si?cles and Hood?sie Rock?ets, some of them smok?ing Kents from a pack Jim?mie

Poli?no—Jim?mie Po?lio, they had all called him, be?cause he had that fucked-?up

thing wrong with him, that club?foot—had hawked out of his moth?er's dress?er

draw?er. Hen?ry, pre?dictably enough, had been one of the ones smok?ing.

There were cer?tain ways of re?fer?ring to things in the gang Hen?ry was a part of (and

which Ed?die, as his lit?tle broth?er, was al?so a part of); the ar got of their mis?er?able

lit?tle ka-?tet. In Hen?ry's gang, you nev?er beat any?one else up; you sent em home

with a fuckin rup?ture. You nev?er made out with a girl; you fucked that sk?ag til she

cried. You nev?er got stoned; you went on a fuckin bombin-? run. And you nev?er

brawled with an?oth?er gang; you got in a fuckin piss?er.

The dis?cus?sion that day had been about who you'd want with you if you got in a

fuckin piss?er. Jim?mie Po?lio (he got to talk first be?cause he had sup?plied the

cigarettes, which Hen?ry's home?boys called the fuckin can? cer-?sticks) opt?ed for

Skip?per Bran?ni?gan, be?cause, he said, Skip?per wasn't afraid of any?one. One time,

Jim?mie said, Skip?per got pissed off at this teach?er—at the Fri?day night PAL

dance, this was—and beat the liv?ing shit out of him. Sent THE FUCKIN

CHAP?ER?ONE home with a fuckin rup?ture, if you could dig it. That was his homie

Skip?per Bran?ni?gan.

Ev?ery?one lis?tened to this solemn?ly, nod?ding their heads as they ate their Rock?ets,

sucked their Pop?si?cles, or smoked their Kents. Ev?ery?one knew that Skip?per

Bran?ni?gan was a fuckin pussy and Jim?mie was full of shit, but no one said so.

Christ, no. If they didn't pre?tend to be?lieve Jim mie Po?lio's out?ra?geous lies, no one

would pre?tend to be?lieve theirs.

Tom?my Fred?er?icks opt?ed for John Par?el?li. Georgie Pratt

went for Csa?ba Drab?nik,

al?so known around the nabe as The Mad Fuckin Hun gar?ian.
Frank Duganel?li

nom?inat?ed Lar?ry Mc?Cain, even though Lar?ry was in Ju?ve?
nile De?ten?tion; Lar?ry

fuckin ruled, Frank said.

By then it was around to Hen?ry Dean. He gave the ques?tion
the weighty

con?sid?er?ation it de?served, then put his arm around his sur?
prised broth?er's

shoul?ders. Ed?die, he said. My lit?tle bro. He's the man.

They all stared at him, stunned—and none more stunned than
Ed?die. His jaw had

been al?most down to his belt-?buck?le. And then Jim?mie Po?
lio said. Come on.

Hen?ry, stop fuckin around. This a se?ri?ous ques?tion. Who 'd
you want watch?ing

your hack if the shit was gonna come down?

I am be?ing se?ri?ous. Hen?ry had replied.

Why Ed?die? Georgie Pratt had asked, echo?ing the ques?tion
which had been in

Ed?die's own mind. He couldn't 't fight his way out of a pa?per
bag. A wet one. So

why the fuck?

Hen?ry thought some more—not, Ed?die was con?vinced, be?
cause he didn't know

why, but be?cause he had to think about how to ar?tic?ulate it.
Then he said: Be?cause

when Ed?die's in that fuckin zone, he could talk the dev?il in?to
set?ting him?self on

fire.

The im?age of Jake re?turned, one mem?ory step?ping on an?
oth?er. Jake scrap?ing steel

on flint, flash?ing sparks at the kin?dling of their camp?fire,
sparks that fell short and

died be?fore they lit.

He could talk the dev?il in?to set?ting him?self on fire.

Move your flint in clos?er, Roland said, and now there was a
third mem?ory, one of

Roland at the door they'd come to at the end of the beach,
Roland burn?ing with

fever, close to death, shak?ing like a mara?ca, cough ing, his
blue bom?bardier's eyes

fixed on Ed?die, Roland say?ing, Come a lit?tle clos?er, Ed?die—
come a lit?tle clos?er

for your fa?ther's sake!

Be?cause he want?ed to grab me, Ed?die thought. Faint?ly, al?most as if it were com?ing

through one of those mag?ic doors from some oth?er world, he heard Blaine telling

them that the endgame had com?menced; if they had been sav?ing their best rid?dles,

now was the time to trot them out. They had an hour.

An hour! On?ly an hour!

His mind tried to fix on that and Ed?die nudged it away. Some?thing was hap?pen?ing

in?side him (at least he prayed it was), some des?per?ate game of as?so?ci?ation, and he

couldn't let his mind get fucked up with dead?lines and con?se?quences and all that

crap; if he did, he'd lose what ev?er chance he had. It was, in a way, like see?ing

some?thing in a piece of wood, some?thing you could carve out—a bow, a sling?shot,

per?haps a key to open some unimag?in?able door. You couldn't look too long,

though, at least to start with. You'd lose it if you did. It was al?most as if you had to

carve while your own back was turned.

He could feel Blaine's en?gines pow?er?ing up be?neath him. In his mind's eye he saw

the flint flash against the steel, and in his mind's ear he heard Roland telling Jake

to move the flint in clos?er. And don't hit it with the steel, Jake; scrape it.

Why am I here? If this isn't what I want, why does my mind keep com?ing hack to

this place?

Be?cause it's as close as I can get and still stay out of the hurt?zone. On?ly a

medi?um-?sized hurt, ac?tu?al?ly, but it made me think of Hen?ry. Be?ing put down by

Hen?ry.

Hen?ry said you could talk the dev?il in?to set?ting him?self on fire.

Yes. I al?ways loved him for that. That was great.

And now Ed?die saw Roland move Jake's hands, one hold?ing flint and the oth?er

steel, clos?er to the kin?dling. Jake was ner?vous. Ed?die could see it; Roland had seen

it, too. And in or?der to ease his nerves, take his mind off the
re?spon?si?bil?ity of
light?ing the fire, Roland had—
He asked the kid a rid?dle.
Ed?die Dean blew breath in?to the key?hole of his mem?ory.
And this time the
tum?blers turned.

2

The green dot was clos?ing in on Tope?ka, and for the first time
Jake felt vi bra?tion

... as if the track be?neath them had de?cayed to a point where
Blaine's com?pen?sators

could no longer com?plete?ly han?dle the prob?lem. With the
sense of vi?bra?tion there

at last came a feel?ing of speed. The walls and ceil?ing of the
Barony Coach were

still opaqued, but Jake found he didn't need to see the coun?try?
side blur?ring past to

imag?ine it. Blaine was rolling full out now, lead?ing his last
son?ic boom across the

waste lands to the place where Mid-?World end?ed, and Jake al?
so found it easy to

imag?ine the transteel piers at the end of the mono?rail. They
would be paint?ed in

di ag?onal stripes of yel?low and black. He didn't know how he
knew that, but he

did.

"TWEN?TY-?FIVE MIN?UTES," Blaine said com?pla?cent?ly.
"WOULD YOU TRY

ME AGAIN, GUN?SLINGER?"

"I think not, Blaine." Roland sound?ed ex?haust?ed. "I've done
with you; you've

beat?en me. Jake?"

Jake got to his feet and faced the route-?map. In his chest his
heart?beat seemed very

slow but very hard, each pulse like a fist slam?ming on a drum?
head. Oy crouched

be?tween his feet, look?ing anx?ious?ly up in?to his face.

"Hel?lo, Blaine," Jake said, and wet his lips.

"HEL?LO, JAKE OF NEW YORK." The voice was kind?ly—the
voice, per?haps, of

a nice old fel?low with a habit of mo?lest?ing the chil?dren he
from time to time leads

in?to the bush?es. "WOULD YOU TRY ME WITH RID?DLES
FROM YOUR

BOOK? OUR TIME TO?GETH?ER GROWS SHORT.”

“Yes,” Jake said. “I would try you with these rid?dles. Give me your un?der?stand?ing

of the truth con?cern?ing each, Blaine.”

“IT IS FAIR?LY SPO?KEN, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I WILL DO AS YOU ASK.”

Jake opened the book to the place he had been keep?ing with his fin ger. Ten

rid?dles. Eleven, count?ing Sam?son’s rid?dle, which he was sav?ing for last. If Blaine

an?swered them all (as Jake now be?lieved he prob?ably would), Jake would sit down

next to Roland, take Oy on?to his lap, and wait for the end. There were, af?ter all,

oth?er worlds than these.

“Lis?ten, Blaine: In a tun?nel of dark?ness lies a beast of iron. It can on?ly at?tack when

pulled back. What is it?”

“A BUL?LET.” No hes?ita?tion.

“Walk on the liv?ing, they don’t even mum?ble. Walk on the dead, they mut?ter and

grum?ble. What are they?”

“FALL?EN LEAVES.” No hes?ita?tion, and if Jake re?al?ly knew in his heart that the

game was lost, why did he feel such de?spair, such bit?ter?ness, such anger?

Be?cause he’s a pain, that’s why. Blaine is a re?al?ly BIG pain, and I’d like to push

his face in it, just once. I think even mak?ing him stop is sec?ond to that on my wish-

list.

Jake turned the page. He was very close to Rid?dle-?De-?Dum’s tom-?out an?swer

sec?tion now; he could feel it un?der his fin?ger, a kind of jagged lump. Very close to

the end of the book. He thought of Aaron Deep?neau in the Man?hat?tan Restau?rant

of the Mind, Aaron Deep?neau telling him to come back any?time, play a lit?tle

chess, and oh just by the way, old fat?so made a pret?ty good cup of cof?fee. A wave

of home?sick?ness so strong it was like dy?ing swept over him. He felt he would have

sold his soul for a look at New York; hell, he would have sold it for one deep lung-

fill?ing breath of Forty-?sec?ond Street at rush hour.

He fought it off and went to the next rid?dle.

“I am emer?alds and di?amonds, lost by the moon. I am found by the sun and picked up soon. What am I?”

“DEW.”

Still re?lent?less. Still un?hesi?tat?ing.

The green dot grew clos?er to Tope?ka, clos?ing the last of the dis?tance on the route-

map. One af?ter an?oth?er, Jake posed his rid?dles; one af?ter an oth?er, Blaine

an?swered them. When Jake turned to the last page, he saw a boxed mes?sage from

the au?thor or ed?itor or what?ev?er you called some?one who put to?geth?er books like

this: We hope you’ve en?joyed the unique com?bi?na?tion of imag?ina?tion and log?ic

known as RID?DLING!

I haven’t, Jake thought. I haven’t en?joyed it one lit?tle bit, and I hope you choke.

Yet when he looked at the ques?tion above the mes?sage, he felt a thin thread of

hope. It seemed to him that, in this case, at least, they re?al?ly had saved the best for

last.

On the route-?map, the green dot was now no more than a fin?ger’s width from

Tope?ka.

“Hur?ry up, Jake,” Su?sana?h murmured.

“Blaine?”

“YES, JAKE OF NEW YORK.”

“With no wings, I fly. With no eyes, I see. With no arms, I climb. More

fright?en?ing than any beast, stronger than any foe. I am cunning, ruth?less, and tall;

in the end, I rule all. What am I?”

The gun?slinger had looked up, blue eyes gleam?ing. Su?sana?h began to turn her

ex?pec?tant face from Jake to the route-?map. Yet Blaine’s answer was as prompt as

ev?er: “THE IMAG?INA?TION OF MAN AND WOM?AN.”

Jake briefly con?sidered ar?gu?ing, then thought, Why waste our time? As al?ways, the

an?swer, when it was right, seemed al?most self-?ev?ident. “Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you

“speak true.”

“AND THE FAIR-?DAY GOOSE IS AL?MOST MINE, I WOT.
NINE?TEEN

MIN?UTES AND FIFTY SEC?ONDS TO TER?MI?NA?TION.
WOULD YOU SAY

MORE, JAKE OF NEW YORK? VI?SU?AL SEN SORS IN?DI?CATE
YOU HAVE

COME TO THE END OF YOUR BOOK, WHICH WAS NOT, I
MUST SAY,

AS GOOD AS I HAD HOPED.“

”Ev?ery?body’s a god?dam crit?ic,” Su?san?nah said sot?to voce.
She wiped a tear from

the com?er of one eye; with?out look?ing di?rect?ly at her, the
gun slinger took her free

hand. She clasped it tight?ly.

”Yes, Blaine, I have one more,” Jake said.

”EX?CEL?LENT.“

”Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came
sweet?ness.“

”THIS RID?DLE COMES FROM THE HOLY BOOK KNOWN AS
’OLD

TES?TA?MENT BIBLE OF KING JAMES.”“ Blaine sound?ed
amused, and Jake felt

the last of his hope slip away. He thought he might cry—not so
much out of fear

as frus?tra?tion. ”IT WAS MADE BY SAM SON THE STRONG.
THE EATER IS

A LI?ON; THE SWEET?NESS IS HON?EY, MADE BY BEES
WHICH HIVED IN

THE LI?ON’S SKULL. NEXT? YOU STILL HAVE OVER EIGH?
TEEN

MIN?UTES, JAKE.“

Jake shook his head. He let go of Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! and smiled
when Oy caught it

neat?ly in his jaws and then stretched his long neck up to Jake,
hold?ing it out again.

”I’ve told them all. I’m done.“

”SHUCKS, L’IL TRAIL?HAND, THAT’S A PURE-?D SHAME,”
Blaine said. Jake

found this drawly John Wayne im?ita?tion all but un?bear able
in their cur?rent

cir?cum?stances. ”LOOKS LIKE I WIN THAT THAR GOOSE, UN?
LESS

SOME?BODY ELSE CARES TO SPEAK UP. WHAT ABOUT YOU,
OY OF

MID-WORLD? GOT ANY RID-DLES, MY LIT TLE BUM?BLER
BUD?DY?“

”Oy!“ the bil-ly-bum?bler re?spond?ed, his voice muf?led by
the book. Still smil?ing,

Jake took it and sat down next to Roland, who put an arm
around him.

”SU?SAN?NAH OF NEW YORK?“

She shook her head, not look?ing up. She had turned Roland’s
hand over in her

own, and was gen?tly trac?ing the healed stumps where his first
two fin?gers had

been.

”ROLAND SON OF STEVEN? HAVE YOU RE?MEM?BERED ANY
OTH?ERS

FROM THE FAIR-?DAY RID?DLINGS OF GILEAD?“

Roland al?so shook his head . . . and then Jake saw that Ed?die
Dean was rais?ing his.

There was a pe?cu?liar smile on Ed?die’s face, a pe?cu?liar shine
in Ed?die’s eyes, and

Jake found that hope hadn’t de?sert?ed him, af?ter all. It sud?
den?ly flow?ered anew in

his mind, red and hot and vivid. Like . . . well, like a rose. A rose
in the full fever

of its sum?mer.

”Blaine?“ Ed?die asked in a low tone. To Jake his voice sound?
ed queer?ly choked.

”YES, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK.“ Un?mis?tak?able dis?dain.

”I have a cou?ple of rid?dles,” Ed?die said. ”Just to pass the time
be tween here and

Tope?ka, you un?der?stand.“ No, Jake re?al?ized, Ed?die didn’t
sound as if he were

chok?ing; he sound?ed as if he were try?ing to hold back laugh?
ter.

”SPEAK, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK.“

3

Sit?ting and lis?ten?ing to Jake run through the last of his rid?
dles, Ed?die had mused

on Roland’s tale of the Fair-?Day goose. From there his mind
had re?turned to

Hen?ry, trav?el?ling from Point A to Point B through the mag?ic
of as?so?cia?tive

think?ing. Or, if you want?ed to get Zen about it, via Trans-?
Bird Air?lines: goose to

turkey. He and Hen?ry had once had a dis?cus?sion about get?
ting off hero?in. Hen?ry

had claimed that go?ing cold turkey wasn't the on?ly way; there was al?so, he said,

such a thing as go?ing cool turkey. Ed?die asked Hen?ry what you called a hype who

had just ad?min?is?tered a hot shot to him?self, and, with?out miss?ing a beat, Hen?ry had

said. You call that baked turkey. How they had laughed . . . but now, all this long,

strange time lat?er, it looked very much as if the joke was go?ing to be on the

younger Dean broth?er, not to men?tion the younger Dean broth?er's new friends.

Looked like they were all go?ing to be baked turkey be?fore much longer.

Un?less you can yank it out of the zone.

Yes.

Then do it, Ed?die. It was Hen?ry's voice again, that old res?ident of his head, but

now Hen?ry sound?ed sober and clear-?mind?ed. Hen?ry sound?ed like his friend in?stead

of his en?emy, as if all the old con?licts were fi?nal?ly set?tled, all the old hatch?ets

buried. Do it—make the dev?il set him?self on fire. It 'II hurt a lit?tle, maybe, but

you've hurt worse. Hell, I hurt you worse my?self, and you sur?vived. Sur?vived just

fine. And you know where to look.

Of course. In their palaver around the camp?fire Jake had fi?nal?ly man aged to light.

Roland had asked the kid a rid?dle to loosen him up, Jake had struck a spark in?to

the kin?dling, and then they had all sat around the fire, talk?ing. Talk?ing and

rid?dling.

Ed?die knew some?thing else, too. Blaine had an?swered hun?dreds of rid?dles as they

ran south?east along the Path of the Beam, and the oth?ers be?lieved that he had

an?swered ev?ery sin?gle one of them with?out hesi?ta tion. Ed?die had thought much

the same . . . but now, as he cast his mind back over the con?test, he re?al?ized an

in?ter?est?ing thing: Blaine had hes?itat?ed.

Once.

He was pissed, too. Like Roland was.

the gun?slinger, al?though of?ten ex?as?per?at?ed by Ed?die, had shown re?al anger to?ward

him just a sin?gle time af?ter the busi?ness of carv?ing the key, when Ed?die had al?most

choked. Roland had tried to cov?er the depth of that anger—make it seem like

noth?ing but more ex?as?per?ation—but Ed?die had sensed what was un?der?neath. He

had lived with Hen?ry Dean for a long time, and was still exquisite?ly at?tuned to all

the neg?ative emo?tions. It had hurt him, too—not Roland’s anger it?self, ex?act?ly, but

the con?tempt with which it had been laced. Con?tempt had al?ways been one of

Hen?ry’s fa?vorite weapons.

Why did the dead ba?by cross the road? Ed?die had asked. Be?cause it was sta?pled to

the chick?en, nyuck-?nyuck-?nyuck!

Lat?er, when Ed?die had tried to de?fend his rid?dle, ar?gu?ing that it was taste?less but

not point?less, Roland’s re?sponse had been strange?ly like Blaine’s: / don’t care

about taste. It’s sense?less and un?solv?able, and that’s what makes it sil?ly. A good

rid?dle is nei?ther.

But as Jake fin?ished rid?dling Blaine, Ed?die re?al?ized a won?der?ful, lib er?at?ing thing:

that word good was up for grabs. Al?ways had been, al?ways would be. Even if the

man us?ing it was maybe a thou?sand years old and could shoot like Buf?fa?lo Bill,

that word was still up for grabs. Roland him?self had ad?mit?ted he had nev?er been

very good at the rid?dling game. His tu?tor claimed that Roland thought too deeply;

his fa?ther thought it was lack of imag?ina?tion. What?ev?er the rea?son, Roland of

Gilead had nev?er won a Fair-?Day rid?dling. He had sur?vived all his con?tem?po?raries,

and that was cer?tain?ly a prize of sorts, but he had nev?er car?ried home a prize

goose. I could al?ways haul a gun faster than any of my mates, but I’ve nev?er been

much good at think?ing around cor?ners.

Ed?die re?mem?bered try?ing to tell Roland that jokes were rid?

dles designed to help

you build up that often overlooked talent, but Roland had ignored him. The way,

Eddie supposed, a color-blind person would ignore someone's description of a rainbow.

Eddie thought Blaine also might have trouble thinking around corners.

He realized he could hear Blaine asking the others if they had any more

ridcles—even asking Oy. He could hear the mockery in Blaine's voice, could hear

it very well. Sure he could. Because he was coming back. Back from that fabled

zone. Back to see if he could talk the devil into setting himself on fire. No gun

would help this time, but maybe that was all right. Maybe that was all right

because—

Because I shoot with my mind. My mind. God help me to shoot this overblown

calculator with my mind. Help me shoot it from around the corner.

"Blaine?" he said, and then, when the computer had acknowledged him: "I have a

couple of ridcles." As he spoke, he discovered a wonderful thing: he was

struggling to hold back laughter.

4

"SPEAK, EDDIE OF NEW YORK."

No time to tell the others to be on their guard, that anything might happen, and

from the look of them, no need, either. Eddie forgot about them and turned his mind

attention to Blaine.

"What has four wheels and flies?"

"THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, AS I HAVE ALREADY SAID."

Disapproval—and dislike? Yeah, probably—all but oozing out of that voice.

"ARE YOU SO STUPID OR INATTENTIVE THAT YOU DO NOT REMEMBER? IT WAS THE FIRST RIDCLE YOU ASKED ME."

Yes, Eddie thought. And what we all missed—because we were fixated on

stumping you with some brain-buster out of Roland's past or Jake's book—is that

the con?test al?most end?ed right there.

“You didn’t like that one, did you, Blaine?”

“I FOUND IT EX?CEED?ING?LY STUPID,” Blaine agreed. “PER HAPS THAT’S

WHY YOU ASKED IT AGAIN. LIKE CALLS TO LIKE, ED?DIE OF NEW

YORK, IS IT NOT SO?”

A smile lit Ed?die’s face; he shook his fin?ger at the route-?map. “Sticks and stones

may break my bones, but words will nev?er hurt me. Or, as we used to say back in

the neigh?bor?hood, ‘You can rank me to the dogs and back, but I’ll nev?er lose the

hard-?on I use to fuck your moth?er.’ ”

“Hur?ry up!” Jake whis?pered at him. “If you can do some? thing, do it!”

“It doesn’t like sil?ly ques?tions,” Ed?die said. “It doesn’t like sil?ly games. And we

knew that. We knew it from Char?lie the Choo-?Choo. How stupid can you get?

Hell, that was the book with the an?swers, not Rid?dle-?De-?Dum, but we nev?er saw it.”

Ed?die searched for the oth?er rid?dle that had been in Jake’s Fi?nal Es?say, found it, posed it.

“Blaine: when is a door not a door?”

Once again, for the first time since Su?san?nah had asked Blaine what had four legs

and flies, there came a pe?cu?liar click?ing sound, like a man pop?ping his tongue on

the roof of his mouth. The pause was briefer than the one which had fol?lowed

Su?san?nah’s open?ing rid?dle, but it was still there—Ed?die heard it. “WHEN IT’S A

JAR, OF COURSE” Blaine said. He sound?ed dour, un?hap?py. “THIR?TEEN

MIN?UTES AND FIVE SEC ONDS RE?MAIN BE?FORE TER?MI? NA?TION,

ED?DIE OF NEW YORK-?WOULD YOU DIE WITH SUCH STUPID RID?DLES

IN YOUR MOUTH?”

Ed?die sat bolt up?right, star?ing at the route-?map, and al? though he could feel warm

trick?les of sweat run?ning down his back, that smile on his face

widened.

"Quit your whin?ing, pal. If you want the priv?ilege of smear?ing us all over the

land?scape, you'll just have to put up with a few rid?dles that aren't quite up to your stan?dards of log?ic."

"YOU MUST NOT SPEAK TO ME IN SUCH A MAN?NER."

"Or what? You'll kill me? Don't make me laugh. Just play. You agreed to the game; now play it."

Thin pink light flashed briefly out of the route-?map. "You're mak?ing him an?gry,"

Lit?tle Blaine mourned. "Oh, you're mak?ing him so an?gry."

"Get lost, squirt," Ed?die said, not un?kind?ly, and when the pink glow re?ced?ed, once

again re?veal?ing a flash?ing green dot that was al?most on top of Tope?ka, Ed?die said:

"An?swer this one, Blaine: the big mo?ron and the lit?tle mo?ron were stand?ing on the

bridge over the Riv?er Send. The big mo ron fell off. How come the lit?tle mo?ron

didn't fall off, too?"

"THAT IS UN?WOR?THY OF OUR CON?TEST. I WILL NOT ANSWER." On

the last word Blaine's voice ac?tu?al?ly dropped in?to a low?er reg?is?ter, mak?ing him

sound like a four?teen-?year-?old cop?ing with a change of voice.

Roland's eyes were not just gleam?ing now but blaz?ing. "What do you say, Blaine?"

I would un?der?stand you well. Are you say?ing that you cry off?"

"NO! OF COURSE NOT! BUT—"

"Then an?swer, if you can. An?swer the rid?dle."

"IT'S NOT A RID?DLE!" Blaine al?most bleat?ed. "IT'S A JOKE, SOME?THING

FOR STUPID CHIL?DREN TO CACK?LE OVER IN THE PLAY YARD!"

"An?swer now or I de?clare the con?test over and our ka-?tet the win?ner," Roland said.

He spoke in the dry?ly con?fi?dent tone of au?thor?ity Ed?die had first heard in the town

of Riv?er Cross?ing. "You must an?swer, for it is stu pid?ity you com?plain of, not

trans?gres?ion of the rules, which we agreed up?on mu?tu?al?

ly.“

An?oth?er of those click?ing sounds, but this time it was much loud?er— so loud, in

fact, that Ed?die winced. Oy flat?ened his ears against his skull. It was fol?lowed by

the longest pause yet; three sec?onds, at least. Then:

”THE LIT?TLE MO?RON DID NOT FALL OFF BE?CAUSE HE WAS A LIT?TLE

MORE ON.“ Blaine sound?ed sulky. ”MORE PHO?NET?IC CO IN?CI?DENCE. TO

EVEN AN?SWER SUCH AN UN?WOR?THY RID?DLE MAKES ME FEEL

SOILED.“

Ed?die held up his right hand. He rubbed the thumb and fore?fin?ger to?geth?er.

”WHAT DOES THAT SIG?NI?FY, FOOL?ISH CREA?TURE?“

”It’s the world’s small?est vi?olin, play?ing ‘My Heart Pumps Pur?ple Piss for You,’ “

Ed?die said. Jake fell in?to an un?con?trol?lable fit of laugh?ter. ”But nev?er mind the

cheap New York hu?mor; back to the con?test. Why do po?lice lieu?tenants wear

belts?“

The lights in the Barony Coach be?gan to flick?er. An odd thing was hap?pen?ing to

the walls, as well; they be?gan to fade in and out of true, lung?ing to?ward

trans?paren?cy, per?haps, and then opaquing again. See?ing this phe?nomenon even out

of the com?er of his eye made Ed?die feel a bit whoop?sy.

”Blaine? An?swer.“

”An?swer,“ Roland agreed. ”An?swer, or I de?clare the con?test at an end and hold you

to your promise.“

Some?thing touched Ed?die’s el?bow. He looked down and saw Su?sana’s small

and shape?ly hand. He took it, squeezed it, smiled at her. He hoped the smile was

more con?fi?dent than the man mak?ing it felt. They were go?ing to win the

con?test—he was al?most sure of that—but he had no idea what Blaine would do if

and when they did.

”TO ... TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS?“ Blaine’s voice firmed, and re?peat?ed the

question as a statement. "TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS. A RID?

DLE BASED

UP?ON THE EX?AG?GER?AT?ED SIM?PLIC?ITY OF—"

"Right. Good one, Blaine, but never mind trying to kill time—it won't work.

Next—"

"I IN?SIST YOU STOP ASK?ING THESE SIL?LY—"

"Then stop the mono," Ed?die said. "If you're that upset, stop right here, and I will."

"NO."

"Okay, then, on we go. What's Irish and stays out in back of the house, even in the rain?"

There was another of those clicks, this time so loud it felt like having a blunt spike

driven against his eardrum. A pause of five seconds. Now the flashing green dot

on the route-map was so close to Topeka that it lit the word like neon each time it

flashed. Then: "PAD?DY O'FUR?NI?TURE."

The correct answer to a joke-rid?dle Ed?die had first heard in the alley behind

Dahlie's, or at some similar gathering-point, but Blaine had apparently paid a

price for forcing his mind into a channel that could conceive it: the Barony Coach

lights were flashing more wildly than ever, and Ed?die could hear a low humming

from inside the walls—the kind of sound your stereo amp made just before its shit

blew up.

Pink light stuttered from the route-map. "Stop!" Little Blaine cried, his voice so

wa?very it sounded like the voice of a character from an old Warner Bros. cartoon.

"Stop it, you're killing him!"

What do you think he's trying to do to us, squirt? Ed?die thought.

He considered shooting Blaine one Jake had told while they'd been sitting around

the campfire that night—What's green, weighs a hundred tons, and lives at the

bottom of the ocean? Mo?by Snot!—and then didn't. He wanted to stick further

inside the bounds of logic than that one allowed . . . and he

could do it. He didn't

think he would have to get much more surreal than the level of, say, a third-grade

with a fair-to-good collection of Garbage Pail Kids cards in order to fuck Blaine

up royally ... and permanently. Because no matter how many emotions his fancy

dipolar circuits had allowed him to mimic, he was still an it—a computer. Even

following Eddie this far into ridicule's Twilight Zone had caused Blaine's sanity

to totter.

"Why do people go to bed, Blaine?"

"BECAUSE ... BECAUSE ... GODS DAMN YOU, BECAUSE ..."

A low squalling started up from beneath them, and suddenly the Barony Coach

swayed violently from right to left. Susanah screamed. Jake was thrown into her

lap. The gunslinger grabbed them both.

"BECAUSE THE BED WON'T COME TO THEM, GODS DAMN YOU! NINE

MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS!"

"Give up, Blaine," Eddie said. "Stop before I have to blow your mind completely.

If you don't quit, it's going to happen. We both know it."

"NO!"

"I got a million of these puppies. Been hearing them my whole life.

They stick to my mind the way flies stick to flypaper. Hey, with some people it's

recipes. So what do you say? Want to give?"

"NO! NINE MINUTES AND THIRTY SECONDS!"

"Okay, Blaine. You asked for it. Here comes the cruncher. Why did the dead baby

cross the road?"

The mono took another of those gigantic lurches; Eddie didn't understand how it

could still stay on its track after that, but somehow it did. The screaming from

beneath them grew louder; the walls, floor, and ceiling of the car began to cycle

madly between opacity and transparency. At one moment they were enclosed, at

the next they were rushing over a gray daylight landscape that stretched flat and

fea?ture?less to a hori?zon which ran across the world in a straight line.

The voice which came from the speak?ers was now that of a pan?icky child: “I

KNOW IT, JUST A MO?MENT, I KNOW IT, RE?TRIEVAL IN PROGRESS,

ALL LOG?IC CIR?CUITS IN USE—”

“An?swer,” Roland said.

“I NEED MORE TIME! YOU MUST GIVE IT TO ME!” Now there was a kind

of cracked tri?umph in that splin?tered voice. “NO TEM?PO?RAL LIM?ITS FOR

AN?SWER?ING WERE SET, ROLAND OF GILEAD, HATE?FUL GUN?SLINGER

OUT OF A PAST THAT SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD!”

“No,” Roland agreed, “no time lim?its were set, you are quite right. But you may

not kill us with a rid?dle still unan?swered, Blaine, and Tope?ka draws nigh.

An?swer!”

The Barony Coach cy?cled in?to in?vis?ibil?ity again, and Ed?die saw what ap?peared to

be a tall and rusty grain el?eva?tor go flash?ing past; it was in his view bare?ly long

enough for him to iden?ti?fy it. Now he ful?ly ap?pre?ci?at?ed the ma?ni?acal speed at

which they were trav?el?ing; per?haps three hun?dred miles faster than a com?mer?cial

jet at cruis?ing speed.

“Let him alone!” moaned the voice of Lit?tle Blaine. “You’re killing him, I say!

Killing him!”

“Isn’t that ’bout what he want?ed?” Su?san?nah asked in the voice of Det?ta Walk?er.

“To die? That’s what he said. We don’t mind, ei?ther. You not so bad, Lit?tle Blaine,

but even a world as fucked up as this one has to be bet?ter with your big broth?er

gone. It’s just him takin us with him we been ob?jectin to all this time.”

“Last chance,” Roland said. “An?swer or give up the goose, Blaine.”

“I ... I ... YOU . . . SIX?TEEN LOG THIR?TY-?THREE . . . ALL CO?SINE

SUB?SCRIPTS ... AN?TI ... AN?TI ... IN ALL THESE YEARS . . .

BEAM . . .

FLOOD . . . PYTHAGORE?AN . . . CARTE?SIAN LOG?IC . . . CAN
I ... DARE I

... A PEACH . . . EAT A PEACH ... ALL?MAN BROTH?ERS . . .
PA?TRI?CIA . . .

CROCODILE AND WHIPLASH SMILE ... CLOCK OF DI?ALS . . .
TICK-

TOCK, ELEVEN O'CLOCK, THE MAN'S IN THE MOON AND HE'S
READY

TO ROCK . . . IN?CES?SA?MENT . . . IN?CES?SA?MENT, MON
CHER ... OH MY

HEAD . . . BLAINE . . . BLAINE DARES . . . BLAINE WILL AN?
SWER ... I ..."

Blaine, now scream?ing in the voice of an in?fant, lapsed in?to
some oth?er lan?guage

and be?gan to sing. Ed?die thought it was French. He knew none
of the words, but

when the drums kicked in, he knew the song per fect?ly well:
"Vel?cro Fly" by Z.Z.

Top.

The glass over the route-?map blew out. A mo?ment lat?er, the
route-?map it?self

ex?plod?ed from its sock?et, re?veal?ing twin?kling lights and a
maze of cir?cuit-?boards

be?hind it. The lights pulsed in time to the drums. Sud den?ly
blue fire flashed out,

siz?zling the sur?face around the hole in the wall where the map
had been, scorch?ing

it black. From deep?er with?in that wall, to?ward Blaine's blunt,
bul?let-?shaped snout,

came a thick grind?ing noise.

"It crossed the road be?cause it was sta?pled to the chick?en,
you dopey fuck!" Ed?die

yelled. He got to his feet and start?ed to walk to?ward the
smok?ing hole where the

route-?map had been. Su?san?nah grabbed at the back of his
shirt, but Ed?die bare?ly

felt it. Bare?ly knew where he was, in fact. The bat?tle-?fire had
dropped over him,

burn?ing him ev?ery?where with its righ?teous heat, siz?zling
his sight, fry?ing his

synaps?es and roast?ing his heart in its holy glow. He had Blaine
in his sights, and

al?though the thing be?hind the voice was al?ready mor?tal?ly
wound?ed, he was un?able

to stop squeez?ing the trig?ger: I shoot with my mind.

“What’s the dif?fer?ence be?tween a truck?load of bowl?ing balls and a truck?load of

dead wood?chucks?” Ed?die raved. ”You can’t un?load a truck-?load of bowl?ing balls with a pitch?fork!”

A ter?ri?ble shriek of min?gled anger and agony is?sued from the hole where the route-

map had been. It was fol?lowed by a gust of blue fire, as if some?where for?ward of

Barony Coach an elec?tric drag?on had ex?haled vio lent?ly. Jake called a warn?ing,

but Ed?die didn’t need it; his re?flex?es had been re?placed with ra?zor-?blades. He

ducked, and the burst of elec?tric?ity went over his right shoul?der, mak?ing the hair

on that side of his neck stand up. He drew the gun he wore—a heavy .45 with a

worn san?dal?wood grip, one of two re?volvers which Roland had brought out of Mid-

World’s ru?in. He kept walk?ing as he bore down on the front of the coach . . . and of

course he kept talk?ing. As Roland had said, Ed?die would die talk?ing. As his old

friend Cuth?bert had done. Ed?die could think of many worse ways to go, and on?ly

one bet?ter.

”Say, Blaine, you ug?ly, sadis?tic fuck! Since we’re talk?ing rid?dles, what is the

great?est rid?dle of the Ori?ent? Many men smoke but Fu Manchu! Get it? No? So

sol?ly, Chol?ly! How about this one? Why’d the wom?an name her son Sev?en and a

Half? Be?cause she drew his name out of a hat!”

He had reached the puls?ing square. Now he lift?ed Roland’s gun and the Barony

Coach sud?den?ly filled with its thun?der. He put all six rounds in?to the hole, fan?ning

the ham?mer with the flat of his hand in the way Roland had shown them, know?ing

on?ly that this was right, this was prop?er . . . this was ka, god?dammit, fuck?ing ka, it

was the way you end?ed things if you were a gun?slinger. He was one of Roland’s

tribe, all right, his soul was prob?ably damned to the deep?est

pit of hell, and he

wouldn't have changed it for all the hero?in in Asia.

"I HATE YOU!" Blaine cried in his child?ish voice. The splin ters were gone from

it now; it was grow?ing soft, mushy. "I HATE YOU FOR?EV?ER!"

"It's not dy?ing that both?ers you, is it?" Ed?die asked. The lights in the hole where

the route-?map had been were fad?ing. More blue fire flashed, but he hard?ly had to

pull his head back to avoid it; the flame was small and weak. Soon Blaine would

be as dead as all the Pubes and Grays in Lud. "It's los?ing that both?ers you."

"HATE . . . FOR?RRRrmr . . ."

The word de?gen?er?at?ed in?to a hum. The hum be?came a kind of stut?tery thud?ding sound. Then it was gone.

Ed?die looked around. Roland was there, hold?ing Su?san?nah with one arm curved

around her butt, as one might hold a child. Her thighs clasped his waist. Jake stood

on the gun?slinger's oth?er side, with Oy at his heel.

Drift?ing out of the hole where the route-?map had been was a pe?cu?liar charred

smell, some?how not un?pleas?ant. To Ed?die it smelled like burn?ing leaves in

Oc?to?ber. Oth?er?wise, the hole was as dead and dark as a corpse's eye. All the lights in there had gone out.

Your goose is cooked, Blaine, Ed?die thought, and your turkey's baked. Hap?py

fuckin Thanks?giv?ing.

5

The shriek?ing from be?neath the mono stopped. There was one fi?nal, grind?ing thud

from up front, and then those sounds ceased, too. Roland felt his legs and hips

sway gen?tly for?ward and put out his free hand to steady him?self. His body knew

what had hap?pened be?fore his head did:

Blaine's en?gines had quit. They were now sim?ply glid?ing for?ward along the track.

But—

"Back," he said. "All the way. We're coast?ing. If we're close

enough to Blaine's

ter?mi?na?tion point, we may still crash."

He led them past the pud?dled re?mains of Blaine's wel?com?ing ice sculp?ture and to

the back of the coach. "And stay away from that thing," he said, point?ing at the

in?stru?ment which looked like a cross be?tween a pi?ano and a harp?si?chord. It stood

on a small plat?form. "It may shift. Gods, I wish we could see where we are! Lie

down. Wrap your arms over your heads."

They did as he told them. Roland did the same. He lay there with his chin press?ing

in?to the nap of the roy?al blue car?pet, eyes shut, think?ing about what had just

hap?pened.

"I cry your par?don, Ed?die," he said. "How the wheel of ka turns! Once I had to ask

the same of my friend Cuth?bert . . . and for the same rea?son. There's a kind of

blind?ness in me. An ar?ro?gant blind?ness."

"I hard?ly think there's any need of par?don-?cry?ing," Ed?die said. He sound?ed

un?com?fort?able.

"There is. I held your jokes in con?tempt. Now they have saved our lives. I cry your

par?don. I have for?got?ten the face of my fa?ther."

"You don't need any par?don and you didn't for?get any?body's face," Ed?die said.

"You can't help your na?ture, Roland."

The gun?slinger con?sidered this care?ful?ly, and dis?cov?ered some?thing which was

won?der?ful and aw?ful at the same time: that idea had nev?er oc curred to him. Not

once in his whole life. That he was a cap?tive of ka— this he had known since

ear?li?est child?hood. But his na?ture ... his very na?ture. ..

"Thank you, Ed?die. I think—"

Be?fore Roland could say what he thought, Blaine the Mono crashed to a fi?nal

bit?ter halt. All four of them were thrown vi?olent?ly up Barony Coach's cen?tral aisle,

Oy in Jake's arms and bark?ing. The cab?in's front wall buck?led and Roland struck it

shoul?der-?first. Even with the padding (the wall was car?pet?ed

and, from the feel,

undercoat?ed with some resilient stuff), the blow was hard enough to numb him.

The chandelier swung forward and tore loose from the ceiling, pelt?ing them with

glass pendants. Jake rolled aside, vacat?ing its landing-zone just in time. The

harp?si?chord?-piano flew off its podium, struck one of the sofas, and overturned,

coming to rest with a discordant brannnggg sound. The mono tilt?ed to the right

and the gun?slinger braced himself, mean?ing to cover both Jake and Susanah with

his own body if it overturned completely. Then it settled back, the floor still a little

canted, but at rest.

The trip was over.

The gun?slinger raised himself up. His shoulder was still numb, but the arm below

it supported him, and that was a good sign. On his left, Jake was sitting up and

picking glass beads out of his lap with a dazed expression. On his right, Susanah

was dabbing a cut under Ed?die's left eye. "All right," Roland said. "Who's hurt—"

There was an explosion from above them, a hollow Pow! that reminded Roland

of the big-bangers Cuthbert and Alain had sometimes lit and tossed down drains,

or into the privies behind the scullery for a prank. And once Cuthbert had shot

some big-bangers with his sling. That had been no prank, no childish folly. That

had been—

Susanah uttered a short cry—more of surprise than fear, the gun slinger

thought—and then hazy daylight was shining down on his face. It felt good. The

taste of the air coming in through the blown emergency exit was even

better—sweet with the smell of rain and damp earth.

There was a bony rat?tle, and a ladder—it appeared to be equipped with rungs

made of twisted steel wire—dropped out of a slot up there.

"First they throw the chandelier at you, then they show you

the door," Ed?die said.

He struggled to his feet, then got Su?san?nah up. "Okay, I know when I'm not

want?ed. Let's make like bees and buzz off."

"Sounds good to me." She reached toward the cut on Ed?die's face again. Ed?die

took her fingers, kissed them, and told her to stop poking the mochan?dise.

"Jake?" the gun?slinger asked. "Okay?"

"Yes," Jake said. "What about you, Oy?"

"Oy!"

"Guess he is," Jake said. He raised his wounded hand and looked at it rue?ful?ly.

"Hurt?ing again, is it?" the gun?slinger asked.

"Yeah. Whatever Blaine did to it is wear?ing off. I don't care, though—I 'm just

glad to still be alive."

"Yes. Life is good. So is astin. There's some of it left."

"As?pirin, you mean."

Roland nodded. A pill of mag?ical prop?er?ties, but one of the words from Jake's

world he would never be able to say cor?rect?ly.

"Nine out of ten doc?tors rec?om?mend Anacin, hon?ey," Su?san?nah said, and when

Jake on?ly looked at her quizzical?ly: "Guess they don't use that one any?more in

your when, huh? Doesn't mat?ter. We're here, sug?arpie, right here and just fine, and

that's what mat?ters." She pulled Jake in?to her arms and gave him a kiss be?tween

the eyes, on the nose, and then flush on the mouth. Jake laughed and blushed

bright red. "That's what mat?ters, and right now that's the on?ly thing in the world

that does."

6

"First aid can wait," Ed?die said. He put his arm around Jake's shoul?ders and led the

boy to the lad?der. "Can you use that hand to climb with?"

"Yes. But I can't bring Oy. Roland, will you?"

"Yes." Roland picked Oy up and tucked him in?to his shirt as he had while

de?scend?ing a shaft un?der the city in pur?suit of Jake and Gash?er. Oy peeked out at

Jake with his bright, gold-?ringed eyes. "Up you go."

Jake climbed. Roland followed close enough so that Oy could sniff the kid's heels

by stretching out his long neck.

"Suze?" Ed died asked. "Need a boost?"

"And get your nasty hands all over my well-turned fan? Not like?ly, white boy!"

Then she dropped him a wink and began to climb, pulling herself up easily with

her muscular arms and balancing with the stumps of her legs. She went fast, but

not too fast for Ed; he reached up and gave her a soft pinch where the pinching

was good. "Oh, my priority!" Susanah cried, laughing and rolling her eyes. Then

she was gone. Only Ed was left, standing by the foot of the ladder and looking

around at the luxury coach which he had believed might well be their ka-tet's

coffin.

You did it, kid. Henry said. Made him set himself on fire. I knew you could,

fuckin'-A. Remember when I said that to those scag-bags behind Dahlie's? Jimmie

Pollio and those guys? And how they laughed? But you did it. Sent him home with

a fuckin rupture.

Well, it worked, anyway, Ed thought, and touched the butt of Roland's gun

without even being aware of it. Well enough for us to walk away one more time.

He climbed two rungs, then looked back down. The Barony Coach already felt

dead. Long dead, in fact, just another artifact of a world that had moved on.

"Adios, Blaine," Ed died said. "So long, partner."

And he followed his friends out through the emergency exit in the roof.

CHAPTER IV

topeka

1

Jake stood on the slightly tilted roof of Blame the Mono, looking south east along

the Path of the Beam. The wind ruffled his hair (now quite long and decidedly un-

Piperish) back from his temples and forehead in waves. His

eyes were wide with
surprise.

He didn't know what he had expected to see—a smaller and more provincial

version of Lud, perhaps—but what he had not expected was what loomed above

the trees of a nearby park. It was a green road sign (against the dull gray autumn

sky, it almost screamed with color) with a blue shield mounted on it:

Roland joined him, lifted Oy gently out of his shirt, and put him down. The

humbler sniffed the pink surface of Blaine's roof, then looked toward the front of

the mono. Here the train's smooth bullet shape was broken by crumpled metal

which had peeled back in jagged wings. Two dark slashes—they began at the

mono's tip and extended to a point about ten yards from where Jake and Roland

stood—gored the roof in parallel lines. At the end of each was a wide, flat metal

pole painted in stripes of yellow and black. These seemed to jut from the top of the

mono at a point just forward of the Barony Coach. To Jake they looked a little like

football goalposts.

"Those are the piers he talked about hitting," Susanah murmured.

Roland nodded.

"We got off lucky, big boy, you know it? If this thing had been going much faster

..."

"Ka," Edie said from behind them. He sounded as if he might be smiling.

Roland nodded. "Just so. Ka."

Jake dismissed the transteel goalposts and turned back toward the sign. He was

half convinced it would be gone, or that it would say something else (mid-world

toll road, perhaps, or beware of demons), but it was still there and still said the

same thing.

"Edie? Susanah? Do you see that?"

They looked along his pointing finger. For a moment—one

long enough for Jake

to fear he was having a hallucination—neither of them
said anything. Then, softly,

Ed?die said: “Holy shit. Are we back home? If we are, where are all the peo?ple?”

And if some?thing like Blaine has been stop?ping off in Tope?ka—our Tope?ka,

Tope?ka, Kansas—how come I haven’t seen any?thing about it on Six?ty Min?utes?”

“What’s Six?ty Min?utes?” Su?san?nah asked. She was shad?ing her eyes, look?ing

south?east to?ward the sign.

“TV show,” Ed?die said. “You missed it by five or ten years. Old white guys in ties.

Doesn’t mat?ter. That sign—”

“It’s Kansas, all right,” Su?san?nah said. “Our Kansas. I guess.” She had spot?ted

an?oth?er sign, just vis?ible over the trees. Now she point?ed un?til Jake, Ed?die, and

Roland had all seen it:

“There a Kansas in your world, Roland?”

“No,” Roland replied, look?ing at the signs, “we’re far be?yond the bound?aries of the

world I knew. I was far be?yond most of the world I knew long be?fore I met you

three. This place . . .”

He stopped and cocked his head to one side, as if he was lis?ten?ing to some sound

al?most too dis?tant to hear. And the ex?pres?sion on his face ... Jake didn’t like it

much.

“Say, kid?dies!” Ed?die said bright?ly. “To?day we’re study?ing Wacky Ge?og?ra?phy in

Mid-?World. You see, boys and girls, in Mid-?World you start in New York, trav?el

south?east to Kansas, and then con?tin?ue along the Path of the Beam un?til you come

to the Dark Tow?er . . . which hap?pens to be smack in the mid?dle of ev?ery?thing.

First, fight the gi?ant lob?sters! Next, ride the psy?chot?ic train! And then, af?ter a vis?it

to our snack?bar for a pop?kin or two—”

“Do you hear any?thing?” Roland broke in. “Any of you?”

Jake lis?tened. He heard the wind comb?ing through the trees of the near?by

park—their leaves had just be?gun to turn—and he heard the click of Oy’s toe?nails

as he strolled back to?ward them along the roof of the Barony

Coach. Then Oy

stopped, so even that sound—

A hand seized him by the arm, making him jump. It was Susanah. Her head was

tilted, her eyes wide. Eddie was also listening. Oy, too; his ears were up and he

was whining far down in his throat.

Jake felt his arms ripped with gooseflesh. At the same time he felt his mouth

tighten in a grimace. The sound, though very faint, was the audio version of

bitting a lemon. And he'd heard something like it before. Back when he was only

five or six, there had been a crazy guy in Central Park who thought he was a

musician . . . well, there were lots of crazy guys in Central Park who thought they

were musicians, but this was the only one Jake had ever seen who played a

workshop tool. The guy had had a sign beside his upturned hat which read world's

greatest SAW-?PLAY?ER! SOUNDS HAWAIIAN DOESN'T IT! PLEASE

CONTRIBUTE TO MY WELFARE!

Greeta Shaw had been with Jake the first time he encountered the saw-player, and

Jake remembered how she had hurried past the guy. Just sitting there like a cellist

in a symphony orchestra he'd been, only with a rust-speckled handsaw spread

across his open legs; Jake remembered the expression of comic horror on Mrs.

Shaw's face, and the quiver of her pressed-together lips, as if—yes, as if she'd just

bitten into a lemon.

This sound wasn't exactly like the one

(SOUNDS HAWAIIAN DOESN'T IT)

the guy in the park had made by vibrating the blade of his saw, but it was close: a

wavery, trembly, metallic sound that made you feel like your sinuses were filling

up and your eyes would shortly begin to gush water. Was it coming from ahead of

them? Jake couldn't tell. It seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere; at

the same time, it was so low he might have been tempted to believe the whole

thing was just his imagination, if the others hadn't—

"Watch out!" Ed died cried. "Help me, you guys! I think he's going to faint!"

Jake wheeled toward the gunslinger and saw that his face had gone as white as

cuttaged cheese above the dusty color of his shirt. His eyes were wide and blank.

One corner of his mouth twitched spasmodically, as if an invisible fishhook were

buried there.

"Jonas and Reynolds and Depape," he said. "The Big Coffin Hunters. And her.

The Coos. They were the ones. They were the ones who—"

Standing on the roof of the moon in his dusty, broken boots, Roland tottered. On

his face was the greatest look of misery Jake had ever seen.

"Oh Susan," he said. "Oh, my dear."

2

They caught him, they formed a protective ring around him, and the gunslinger

felt hot with guilt and self-loathing. What had he done to deserve such enthusiasm?

protectors? What, besides tear them out of their known and ordinary lives as

ruthlessly as a man might tear weeds out of his garden?

He tried to tell them he was all right, they could stand back, he was fine, but no

words would come out; that terrible wavery sound had transported him back to

the box canyon west of Hamby all those years ago. Depape and Reynolds and old

limping Jonas. Yet most of all it was the woman from the hill he hated, and from

black depths of feeling only a very young man can reach. Ah, but how could he

have done aught else but hate them? His heart had been broken. And now, all

these years later, it seemed to him that the most horrible fact of human existence

was that broken hearts mended.

My first thought was, he lied in every word/That hoary cripple, with malicious eye

...

What words? Whose poem?

He didn't know, but he knew that women could lie, too; women who hopped and

grinned and saw too much from the corners of their rheumy old eyes. It didn't

matter who had written the lines of poetry; the words were true words, and that

was all that mattered. Neither Elfred Jonas nor the crone on the hill had been of

Marten's stature—nor even of Walter's—when it came to evil, but they had been

evil enough.

Then, after... in the box canyon west of town . . . that sound . . . that, and the

screams of wounded men and horses . . . for once in his life, even the normal

voluble Cuthbert had been struck silent.

But all that had been long ago, in another when; in the here and now, the warbling

sound was either gone or had temporarily fallen below the threshold of audibility.

They would hear it again, though. He knew that as well as he knew the fact that he

walked a road leading to damnation.

He looked up at the others and managed a smile. The trembling at the corner of his

mouth had quit, and that was something.

"I'm all right," he said. "But hear me well: this is very close to where Mid-World

ends, very close to where End-World begins. The first great course of our quest is

finished. We have done well; we have remembered the faces of our fathers; we

have stood together and been true to one another. But now we have come to a

thinny. We must be very careful."

"A thinny?" Jake asked, looking around nervously.

"Places where the fabric of existence is almost entirely worn away. There are more

since the force of the Dark Tower began to fail. Do you remember what we saw

below us when we left Lud?"

They nodded solemnly, remembering ground which had fused to black glass,

ancient pipes which gleamed with turquoise witchlight, mis

shapen bird-?freaks

with wings like great leath?ern sails. Roland sud?den?ly could not bear to have them

grouped around him as they were, look?ing down on him as folk might look down

on a row?dy who had fall?en in a bar room brawl.

He lift?ed his hands to his friends—his new friends. Ed?die took them and helped

him to his feet. The gun?slinger fixed his enor?mous will on not sway?ing and stood

steady.

“Who was Su?san?” Su?san?nah asked. The crease down the cen?ter of her fore?head

sug?gest?ed she was trou?bled, and prob?ably by more than a co in?ci?den?tal sim?ilar?ity

of names.

Roland looked at her, then at Ed?die, then at Jake, who had dropped to one knee so

he could scratch be?hind Oy’s ears.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, “but this isn’t the place or time.”

“You keep sayin that,” Su?san?nah said. “You wouldn’t just be putting us off again,

would you?”

Roland shook his head. “You shall hear my tale—this part of it, at least—but not

on top of this met?al car?cass.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Be?ing up here is like play?ing on a dead di? nosaur or some?thing.

I keep think?ing Blaine’s go?ing to come back to life and start, I don’t know,

screw?ing around with our heads again.”

“That sound is gone,” Ed?die said. “The thing that sound?ed like a wah-?wah ped?al.”

“It re?mind?ed me of this old guy I used to see in Cen?tral Park,”

Jake said.

“The man with the saw?” Su?san?nah asked. Jake looked up at her, his eyes round

with sur?prise, and she nod?ded. “On?ly he wasn’t old when I used to see him. It’s not

just the ge?og?ra?phy that’s wacky here. Time’s kind of fun?ny, too.”

Ed?die put an arm around her shoul?ders and gave her a brief squeeze. “Amen to that.”

Su?san?nah turned to Roland. Her look was not ac?cus?ing, but there was a lev?el and

open mea?sure?ment in her eyes that the gun?slinger could not help but ad?mire. "I'm

hold?ing you to your promise, Roland. I want to know about this girl that got my name."

"You shall hear," Roland re?peat?ed. "For now, though, let's get off this mon?ster's back."

3

That was eas?ier said than done. Blaine had come to rest slight?ly askew in an

out?door ver?sion of the Cra?dle of Lud (a lit?tered trail of torn pink met?al lay along

one side of this, mark?ing the end of Blaine's last jour?ney), and it was eas?ily twen?ty-

five feet from the roof of the Barony Coach to the ce ment. If there was a de?scent-

lad?der, like the one which had popped conve nient?ly through the emer?gen?cy hatch,

it had jammed when they crunched to a halt.

Roland un?slung his purse, rum?maged, and re?moved the deer?skin har ness they

used for car?ry?ing Su?san?nah when the go?ing got too rough for her wheelchair. The

chair, at least, would not wor?ry them any?more, the gun?slinger re?flect?ed; they had

left it be?hind in their mad scram?ble to board Blaine.

"What you want that for?" Su?san?nah asked tru?cu?lent?ly. She al?ways sound?ed

tru?cu?lent when the har?ness came in?to view. I hate them honky mah?fahs down in

Miss'ip?pi worse'n I hate that har?ness, she had once told Ed?die in the voice of Det?ta

Walk?er, but some?times it be a close thing, sug?ar.

"Soft, Su?san?nah Dean, soft," the gun?slinger said, smil?ing a lit?tle. He un?braid?ed the

net?work of straps which made up the har?ness, set the seat-piece aside, then

pig?tailed the straps back to?geth?er. He wed?ded this to his last good hank of rope

with an old-?fash?ioned sheet?bend knot. As he worked, he lis?tened for the war?bling

of the thin?ny ... as the four of them had lis?tened for the god?

drums; as he and

Ed?die had lis?tened for the lob?strosi?ties to be?gin ask?ing their lawyer?ly ques?tions

(“Dad-?a-?cham? Did-?a-?chee? Dum-?a-?chum?”) as they came tum?bling out of the waves each night.

Ka is a wheel, he thought. Or, as Ed?die liked to say, what?ev?er went around came around.

When the rope was fin?ished, he fash?ioned a loop at the bot?tom of the braid?ed

sec?tion. Jake stepped a foot in?to it with per?fect con?fi?dence, gripped the rope with

one hand, and set?tled Oy in?to the crook of his oth?er arm. Oy looked around

ner?vous?ly, whined, stretched his neck, licked Jake’s face.

“You’re not afraid, are you?” Jake asked the hum?bler.

“ ‘Fraid,” Oy agreed, but he was qui?et enough as Roland and Ed?die low?ered Jake

down the side of the Barony Coach. The rope wasn’t quite long enough to take him

all the way down, but Jake had no trou?ble twist ing his foot free and drop?ping the

last four feet. He set Oy down. The bum?bler trot?ted off, sniff?ing, and lift?ed his leg

against the side of the ter mi?nal build?ing. This was nowhere near as grand as the

Cra?dle of Lud, but it had an old-?fash?ioned look that Roland liked—white boards,

over hang?ing eaves, high, nar?row win?dows, what looked like slate shin?gles. It was

a West?ern look. Writ?ten in gold gilt on a sign which stretched above the ter?mi?nal’s

line of doors was this mes?sage:

ATCHI?SON, TOPE?KA, AND SAN?TA FE

Towns, Roland sup?posed, and that last one sound?ed fa?mil?iar to him; had there not

been a San?ta Fe in the Barony of Mejis? But that led back to?ward Su?s?an, love?ly

Su?s?an at the win?dow with her hair un?braid?ed and all down her back, the smell of

her like jas?mine and rose and hon?ey?suck?le and old sweet hay, smells of which the

or?acle in the moun?tains had been able to make on?ly the palest mimicry. Su?s?an

ly?ing back and look?ing solemn?ly up at him, then smil?ing and putting her hands

be?hind her head so that her breasts rose, as if aching for his hands.

If you love me, Roland, then love me . . . bird and bear and hare and fish...

“ . . . next?”

He looked around at Ed?die, hav?ing to use all of his will to pull him?self back from

Su?san Del?ga?do's when. There were thin?nies here in Tope?ka, all right, and of many

sorts. “My mind was wan?der?ing, Ed?die. Cry your par?don.”

“Su?san?nah next? That's what I asked.”

Roland shook his head. “You next, then Su?san?nah. I'll go last.”

“Will you be okay? With your hand and all?”

“I'll be fine.”

Ed?die nod?ded and stuck his foot in?to the loop. When Ed?die had first come in?to

Mid?World, Roland could have low?ered him eas?ily by him?self, two fin?gers short

the full com?ple?ment or no, but Ed?die had been with?out his drug for months now,

and had put on ten or fif?teen pounds of mus?cle. Roland ac?cept?ed Su?san?nah's help

glad?ly enough, and to?geth?er they low?ered him down.

“Now you, la?dy,” Roland said, and smiled at her. It felt more nat?ural to smile these

days.

“Yes.” But for the nonce she on?ly stood there, bit?ing her low?er lip.

“What is it?”

Her hand went to her stom?ach and rubbed there, as if it ached or griped her. He

thought she would speak, but she shook her head and said, “Noth?ing.”

“I don't be?lieve that. Why do you rub your bel?ly? Are you hurt? Were you hurt

when we stopped?”

She took her hand off her tu?nic as if the flesh just south of her navel had grown

hot. “No. I'm fine.”

“Are you?”

Su?san?nah seemed to think this over very care?ful?ly. “We'll talk,” she said at last.

“We'll palaver, if you like that bet?ter. But you were right be

fore, Roland—this

isn't the place or time."

"All four of us, or just you and me and Ed?die?"

"Just you and me, Roland," she said, and poked the stump of her leg through the

loop. "Just one hen and one roost?er, at least to start with. Now low?er away, if you please."

He did, frown?ing down at her, hop?ing with all his heart that his first idea—the one

that had come to mind as soon as he saw that rest?less?ly rubbing hand—was

wrong. Be?cause she had been in the speak?ing ring, and the demon that denned

there had had its way with her while Jake was trying to cross be?tween the worlds.

Sometimes—often—demon?ic contact changed things.

Never for the bet?ter, in Roland's ex?pe?ri?ence.

He pulled his rope back up af?ter Ed?die had caught Su?san?nah around the waist and

helped her to the plat?form. The gun?slinger walked forward to one of the piers

which had torn through the train's bullet snout, fashion?ing the rope's end in?to a

shake-?loop as he went. He tossed this over the pier, snubbed it (be?ing careful not

to twitch the rope to the left), and then low?ered himself to the plat?form himself,

bent at the waist and leav?ing boot-?tracks on Blaine's pink side.

"Too bad to lose the rope and har?ness," Ed?die remarked when Roland was be?side

them.

"I ain't sorry about that har?ness," Su?san?nah said. "I'd rather crawl along the

pavement un?til I got chewin-?gum all the way up my arms to the elbows."

"We haven't lost any?thing," Roland said. He snugged his hand in?to the rawhide

foot-?loop and snapped it hard to the left. The rope slithered down from the pier,

Roland gath?er?ing it in almost as fast as it came down.

"Neat trick!" Jake said.

"Eat! Rick!" Oy agreed.

"Cort?" Ed?die asked.

"Cort," Roland agreed, smiling.

“The drill in?struc?tor from hell,” Ed?die said. “Bet?ter you than me, Roland. Bet?ter you than me.”

4

As they walked to?ward the doors lead?ing in?to the sta?tion, that low, liq?uid war?bling

sound be?gan again. Roland was amused to see all three of his co?horts wrin?kle their

noses and pull down the com?ers of their mouths at the same time; it made them

look like blood fam?ily as well as ka?tet. Su san?nah point?ed to?ward the park. The

signs loom?ing over the “trees were wa?ver?ing slight?ly, the way things did in a heat-haze.

”Is that from the thin?ny?” Jake asked.

Roland nod?ded.

”Will we be able to get around it?”

”Yes. Thin?nies are dan?ger?ous in much the way that swamps full of quick?sand and

saligs are dan?ger?ous. Do you know those things?”

”We know quick?sand,” Jake said. ”And if saligs are long green things with big

teeth, we know them, too.”

”That’s what they are.”

Su?san?nah turned to look back at Blaine one last time. ”No sil?ly ques tions and no

sil?ly games. The book was right about that.” From Blaine she turned her eyes to

Roland. ”What about Beryl Evans, the wom?an who wrote Char?lie the Choo?-?Choo?

Do you think she’s part of this? That we might even meet her? I’d like to thank her.

Ed?die fig?ured it out, but—“

”It’s pos?si?ble, I sup?pose,” Roland said, ”but on mea?sure, I think not. My world is

like a huge ship that sank near enough shore for most of the wreck?age to wash up

on the beach. Much of what we find is fas?ci?nat?ing, some of it may be use?ful, if ka

al?lows, but all of it is still wreck?age. Sense less wreck?age.” He looked around.

”Like this place, I think.”

”I wouldn’t ex?act?ly call it wrecked,” Ed?die said. ”Look at the paint on the

station—it's a little rusty from the gutters up under the eaves, but it hasn't peeled

anywhere that I can see." He stood in front of the doors and ran his fingers down

one of the glass panels. They left four clear tracks behind. "Dust and plenty of it,

but no cracks. I'd say that this building has been left unmaintained at most since . . .

the start of the summer, maybe?"

He looked at Roland, who shrugged and nodded. He was listening with only half

an ear and paying attention with only half a mind. The rest of him was fixed upon

two things: the warble of the trolley, and keeping away the memories that wanted

to swamp him.

"But Lud had been going to wrack and ruin for centuries" Susanah said. "This

place ... it may or may not be Topeka, but what it really looks like to me is one of

those creepy little towns on The Twilight Zone. You boys probably don't

remember that one, but—"

"Yes, I do," Eddie and Jake said in perfect unison, then looked at each other and

laughed. Eddie stuck out his hand and Jake slapped it.

"They still show the reruns," Jake said.

"Yeah, all the time," Eddie added. "Usually sponsored by bankrupt lawyers who

look like short-haired terrorists. And you're right. This place isn't like Lud. Why would

it be? It's not in the same world as Lud. I don't know where we crossed over,

but—" He pointed again at the blue Interstate 70 shield, as if that proved his case

beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"If it's Topeka, where are the people?" Susanah asked.

Eddie shrugged and raised his hands—who knows?

Jake put his forehead against the glass of the center door, cupped his hands to the

sides of his face, and peered in. He looked for several seconds, then saw

something that made him pull back fast. "Oh-oh," he said. "No wonder the town's

so quiet."

Roland stepped up behind Jake and peered in over the boy's head, cupping his own

hands to reduce his reflection. The gunslinger drew two conclusions before even

looking at what Jake had seen. The first was that although this was most assuredly

a train station, it wasn't really a Blame station . . . not a cradle. The other was that

the station did indeed belong to Eddie's, Jake's, and Susanah's world . . . but

perhaps not to their where.

It's the tiny. We'll have to be careful.

Two corpses were leaning together on one of the long benches that filled most of

the room; but for their hanging, wrinkled faces and black hands, they might have

been revellers who had fallen asleep in the station after an arduous party and

missed the last train home. On the wall behind them was a board marked

departures, with the names of cities and towns and baronies marching down it in a

line. Denver, read one. Wichita, read another. Omaha, read a third. Roland had once

known a one-eyed gambler named Omaha; he had died with a knife in his throat at

a Watch Me table. He had stepped into the clearing at the end of the path with his

head thrown back, and his last breath had sprayed blood all the way up to the

ceiling. Hanging down from the ceiling of this room (which Roland's stupid and

laggard mind insisted on thinking of as a stage rest, as if this were a stop along

some half-forgotten road like the one that had brought him to Tull) was a beautiful

four-sided clock. Its hands had stopped at 4:14, and Roland supposed they would

never move again. It was a sad thought. . . but this was a sad world. He could not

see any other dead people, but experience suggested that where there were two

dead, there were likely four more dead somewhere out of sight. Or four dozen.

"Should we go in?" Eddie asked.

"Why?" the gun-slinger coun?tered. "We have no busi?ness
 here; it doesn't lie along
 the Path of the Beam."
 "You'd make a great tour-?guide," Ed?die said sourly. " 'Keep
 up, ev?ery?one, and
 please don't go wan?der?ing off in?to the—' "
 Jake in?ter?rupt?ed with a re?quest Roland didn't un?der?stand.
 "Do ei?ther of you guys
 have a quar?ter?" The boy was look?ing at Ed?die and Su?san?
 nah. Be?side him was a
 square met?al box. Writ?ten on it in blue was:
 The Tope?ka Cap?ital-?Jour?nal cov?ers Kansas like no oth?er!
 Your home?town pa?per!
 Read it ev?ery day!
 Ed?die shook his head, amused. "Lost all my change at some
 point. Prob?ably
 climb?ing a tree, just be?fore you joined us, in an all-?out ef?fort
 to avoid be?com?ing
 snack-?food for a robot bear. Sor?ry."
 "Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . ." Su?san?nah had her
 purse open and was
 rum?mag?ing through it in a way that made Roland grin broad?
 ly in spite of all his
 pre?oc?cu?pa?tions. It was so damned wom?an?ly, some?how.
 She turned over crum?pled
 Kleenex, shook them to make sure there was noth ing caught in?
 side, fished out a
 com?pact, looked at it, dropped it back, came up with a comb,
 dropped that back—
 She was too ab?sorbed to look up as Roland strode past her,
 draw?ing his gun from
 the dock?er's clutch he had built her as he went. He fired a sin?
 gle time. Su?san?nah let
 out a lit?tle scream, drop?ping her purse and slap ping at the
 emp?ty hol?ster high up
 un?der her left breast.
 "Honky, you scared the livin Je?sus out of me!"
 "Take bet?ter care of your gun, Su?san?nah, or the next time
 some?one takes it from
 you, the hole may be be?tween your eyes in?stead of in a ...
 what is it, Jake? A news-
 telling de?vice of some kind? Or does it hold pa?per?"
 "Both." Jake looked star?tled. Oy had with?drawn halfway
 down the plat?form and
 was look?ing at Roland mis?trust?ful?ly. Jake poked his fin?ger

at the bul?let?-hole in the

cen?ter of the news?pa?per box's lock?ing de?vice. A lit tle curl
of smoke was drift?ing
from it.

"Go on," Roland said. "Open it."

Jake pulled the han?dle. It re?sist?ed for a mo?ment, then a
piece of met?al clunked

down some?where in?side, and the door opened. The box it?self
was emp?ty; the sign

on the back wall read when all pa?pers are gone, please take
dis?play copy. Jake

worked it out of its wire hold?er, and they all gath?ered round.

"What in God's name . . . ?" Su?san?nah's whis?per was both
hor?ri?fied and ac?cus?ing.

"What does it mean? What in God's name hap?pened?"

Be?low the news?pa?per's name, tak?ing up most of the front
page's top half, were

scream?ing black let?ters:

"CAP?TAIN TRIPS" SU?PER?FLU RAGES UNCHECKED

Govt. Lead?ers May Have Fled Coun?try

Tope?ka Hos?pi?tals Jammed with Sick, Dy?ing

Mil?lions Pray for Cure

"Read it aloud," Roland said. "The let?ters are in your speech, I
can?not make them

all out, and I would know this sto?ry very well."

Jake looked at Ed?die, who nod?ded im?pa?tient?ly.

Jake un?fold?ed the news?pa?per, re?veal?ing a dot?-pic?ture
(Roland had seen pic?tures of

this type; they were called "fot?ter?grafs") which shocked them
all: it showed a

lake?side city with its sky?line in flames. cleve?land fires burn
unchecked, the

cap?tion be?neath read.

"Read, kid!" Ed?die told him. Su?san?nah said noth?ing; she was
al?ready read?ing the

sto?ry—the on?ly one on the front page—over his shoul?der.
Jake cleared his throat

as if it were sud?den?ly dry, and be?gan.

5

"The by?line says John Cor?co?ran, plus staff and AP re?ports.
That means a lot of

dif?fer?ent peo?ple worked on it, Roland. Okay. Here goes.
'Amer?ica's great?est

cri?sis—and the world's, per?haps—deep?ened overnight as the
so?-called su?per?flu,

known as Tube-Neck in the Midwest and Captain Trips in California, continues to spread.

"Although the death-toll can only be estimated, medical experts say the total at

this point is horrible beyond comprehension: twenty to thirty million dead in the

continental U.S. alone is the estimate given by Dr. Morris Hackford of Topeka's

St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center. Bodies are being burned from Los

Angeles, California, to Boston, Massachusetts, in crematoria, factories furnaces,

and at landfill sites.

"Here in Topeka, the bereaved who are still well enough and strong enough to do

so are urged to take their dead to one of three sites: the disposal plant north of

Oakland Billard Park; the pit area at Heartland Park Race Track; the landfill on

South-east Sixty-first Street, east of Forbes Field. Landfill users should approach

by Berryton Road; California has been blocked by car wrecks and at least one

downed Air Force transport plane, sources tell us.' "

Jake glanced up at his friends with frightened eyes, looked behind him at the silent

railway station, then looked back down at the newspaper.

"Dr. April MonTOYA of the Storm-Vail Regional Medical Center points out

that the death-toll, horrifying as it is, constitutes only part of this terrible story.

"For every person who has died so far as a result of this new flu-strain," MonTOYA

said, "there are another six who are lying ill in their homes, perhaps as many as a

dozen. And, so far as we have been able to determine, the recovery rate is zero."

Coughing, she then told this reporter: "Speaking personally, I'm not making any

plans for the weekend."

"In other local developments:

"All commercial flights out of Forbes and Phillip Billard have been cancelled.

"All Amtrak rail travel has been suspended, not just in

Tope?ka but across all of

Kansas. The Gage Boulevard Am?trak sta?tion has been closed un?til fur?ther no?tice.

” All Tope?ka schools have al?so been closed un?til fur?ther no?tice. This in?cludes

Dis?tricts 437, 345, 450 (Shawnee Heights), 372, and 501 (metro Tope?ka). Tope?ka

Luther?an and Tope?ka Tech?ni?cal Col?lege are al?so closed, as is KU at Lawrence.

“ Topekans must ex?pect brownouts and per?haps black?outs in the days and weeks

ahead. Kansas Pow?er and Light has an?nounced a ”slow shut?down“ of the Kaw

Riv?er Nu?cle?ar Plant in Wamego. Al?though no one in KawNuke’s Of?fice of Pub?lic

Re?la?tions an?swered this news?pa?per’s calls, a record?ed an?nounce?ment cau?tions that

there is no plant emer?gen?cy, that this is a safe?ty mea?sure on?ly. KawNuke will

re?turn to on?-line sta?tus, the an?nounce?ment con?cludes, ”when the cur?rent cri?sis is

past.“ Any com fort af?ford?ed by this state?ment is in large part negat?ed by the

record?ed state?ment’s fi?nal words, which are not ”Good?bye“ or ”Thank you for

call ing“ but ”God will help us through our time of tri?al.“ “ ”

Jake paused, fol?low?ing the sto?ry to the next page, where there were more pic?tures:

a burned?-out pan?el truck over?turned on the steps of the Kansas Mu?se?um of Nat?ural

His?to?ry; traf?fic on San Fran?cis?co’s Gold?en Gate Bridge stalled bumper to bumper;

piles of corpses in Times Square. One body, Su?san?nah saw, had been hung from a

lamp?post, and that brought back night?mar?ish mem?ories of the run for the Cra?dle of

Lud she and Ed?die had made af?ter part?ing from the gun?slinger; mem?ories of

Lus?ter and Win?ston and Jeeves and Maud. When the god?-drums start?ed up this

time, it was Spanker’s stone what came out of the hat, Maud had said. We set him

to dance. Ex?cept, of course, what she’d meant was that they had set him to hang.

As they had hung some folks, it seemed, back home in lit?tle old

New York. When

things got weird enough, someone always found a lynchrope, it seemed.

Echoes. Everything echoed now. They bounced back and forth from one world to

the other, not fading as ordinary echoes did but growing and becoming more

terrifying. Like the god-drums, Susanah thought, and shuddered.

“ ‘In national developments,’ ” Jake read, “ ‘convention continues to grow that, after

denying the superflu’s existence during its early days, when quarantine measures

might still have had some effect, national leaders have fled to underground

refugees which were created as brain-trust shelters in case of nuclear war. Vice-

President Bush and key members of the Reagan cabinet have not been seen during

the last forty-eight hours. Reagan himself has not been seen since Sunday

morning, when he attended prayer services at Green Valley Methodist Church in

San Simon.

” “ ‘They have gone to the bunkers like Hitler and the rest of the Nazi sewer-rats at

the end of World War II,’ ” said Rep. Steve Sloan. When asked if he had any

objection to being quoted by name, Kansas’s first-term representative, a

Republican, laughed and said: “Why should I? I’ve got a real fine case myself. I’ll

be so much dust in the wind come this time next week.”

“ ‘Fires, most likely set, continue to ravage Cleveland, Indianaapolis, and Terre

Haute.

” ‘A gigantic explosion centered near Cincinnati’s Riverfront Stadium was

apparently not nuclear in nature, as was first feared, but occurred as the result of a

natural gas buildup caused by unauthorized . . .’ ”

Jake let the paper drop from his hands. A gust of wind caught it and blew it the

length of the platform, the few folded sheets separating as they went. Oy stretched

his neck and snagged one of these as it went by. He trotted toward Jake with it in

his mouth, as obedient as a dog with a stick.

"No, Oy, I don't want it," Jake said. He sounded ill and very young.

"At least we know where all the folks are," Susanah said, bending and taking the

paper from Oy. It was the last two pages. They were crammed with obituaries

printed in the tiniest type she had ever seen. No pictures, no causes of death, no

announcement of burial services. Just this one died, beloved of so-and-so, that one

died, beloved of Jill-n-Joe, the other one died, beloved of them-and-those. All in that

tiny, not-quite-even type. It was the jaggedness of the type which convinced her it

was all real.

But how hard they tried to honor their dead, even at the end, she thought, and a

lump rose in her throat. How hard they tried.

She folded the quarto together and looked on the back—the last page of the

Capital-Journal. It showed a picture of Jesus Christ, eyes sad, hands outstretched,

forehead marked from his crown of thorns. Below it, three stark words in huge

type:

PRAY FOR US

She looked up at Eddie, eyes accusing. Then she handed him the newspaper, one

brown finger tapping the date at the top. It was June 24, 1986. Edie had been

drawn into the gunslinger's world a year later.

He held it for a long time, fingers slipping back and forth across the date, as if the

passage of his finger would somehow cause it to change. Then he looked up at

them and shook his head. "No. I can't explain this town, this paper, or the dead

people in that station, but I can set you straight about one thing—everything was

fine in New York when I left. Wasn't it, Roland?"

The gunslinger looked a trifle sour. "Nothing in your city seemed very fine to me,

but the people who lived there did not seem to be survivors of such a plague as this, no."

"There was something called Legionnaires' disease," Edie said. "And AIDS, of course—"

"That's the sex one, right?" Susanah asked. "Transmitted by fruits and drug addicts?"

"Yes, but calling gays fruits isn't the done thing in my when," Edie said. He tried

a smile, but it felt stiff and unnatural on his face and he put it away again.

"So this . . . this never happened," Jake said, tentatively touching the face of Christ on the back page of the paper.

"But it did," Roland said. "It happened in June—sowing of the year one thousand

nine hundred and eighty-six. And here we are, in the aftermath of that plague. If

Edie's right about the length of time that has gone by, the plague of this 'superflu'

was this past June—sowing. We're in Topeka, Kansas, in the Reap of eighty-six.

That's the when of it. As to the where, all we know is that it's not Edie's. It might

be yours, Susanah, or yours, Jake, because you left your world before this

arrived." He tapped the date on the paper, then looked at Jake. "You said

something to me once. I doubt if you remember, but I do; it's one of the most

important things anyone has ever said to me: 'Go, then, there are other worlds than these.' "

"More ridcles," Edie said, scowling.

"Is it not a fact that Jake Chambers died once and now stands before us, alive and

well? Or do you doubt my story of his death under the mountains? That you have

doubted my honesty from time to time is something I know. And I suppose you

have your reasons."

Edie thought it over, then shook his head. "You lie when it suits your purpose,

but I think that when you told us about Jake, you were too fucked up to man?age any?thing but the truth.“

Roland was star?tled to find him?self hurt by what Ed?die had said—You lie when it

suits your pur?pose—but he went on. Af?ter all, it was es?sen?tial?ly true.

”We went back to time’s pool,” the gun?slinger said, ”and pulled him out be?fore he could drown.“

”You pulled him out,” Ed?die cor?rect?ed.

”You helped, though,” Roland said, ”if on?ly by keep?ing me alive, you helped, but

let that go for now. It’s be?side the point. What’s more to it is that there are many

pos?si?ble worlds, and an in?fin?ity of doors lead?ing in?to them. This is one of those

worlds; the thin?ny we can hear is one of those doors . . . on?ly one much big?ger

than the ones we found on the beach.“

”How big?” Ed?die asked. ”As big as a ware?house load?ing door, or as big as the

ware?house?”

Roland shook his head and raised his hands palms to the sky—who knows?

”This thin?ny,” Su?san?nah said. ”We’re not just near it, are we? We came through it.

That’s how we got here, to this ver?sion of Tope?ka.“

”We may have,” Roland ad?mit?ted. ”Did any of you feel some? thing strange? A

sen?sa?tion of ver?ti?go, or tran?sient nau?sea?”

They shook their heads. Oy, who had been watch?ing Jake close?ly, al?so shook his

head this time.

”No,” Roland said, as if he had ex?pect?ed this. ”But we were con?cen?trat?ing on the

rid?dling—“

”Con?cen?trat?ing on not get?ting killed,” Ed?die grunt?ed.

”Yes. So per?haps we passed through with?out be?ing aware. In any case, thin?nies

aren’t nat?ural—they are sores on the skin of ex?is?tence, able to ex?ist be?cause things

are go?ing wrong. Things in all worlds.“

”Be?cause things are wrong at the Dark Tow?er,” Ed?die said.

Roland nod?ded. ”And even if this place—this when, this where

—is not the ka of

your world now, it might become that ka. This plague—or others even

worse—could spread. Just as the thin ones will continue to spread, growing in size

and number. I've seen perhaps half a dozen in my years of searching for the

Tower, and heard maybe two dozen more. The first ... the first one I ever saw was

when I was still very young. Near a town called Hamby." He rubbed his hand up

his cheek again, and was not surprised to find sweat amid the bristles. Love me,

Roland. If you love me, then love me.

"Whatever happened to us, it bumped us out of your world, Roland," Jake said.

"We've fallen off the Beam. Look." He pointed at the sky. The clouds were

moving slowly above them, but no longer in the direction Blame's smashed snout

was pointing. Southeast was still southeast, but the signs of the Beam which they

had grown so used to following were gone.

"Does it matter?" Eddie asked. "I mean ... the Beam may be gone, but the Tower

exists in all worlds, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Roland said, "but it may not be accessible from all worlds."

The year before beginning his wonderful and fulfilling career as a hero in addition,

Eddie had done a brief and not-very-successful turn as a bicycle messenger. Now

he remembered certain office-building elevators he'd been in while making

deliveries, buildings with banks or investment firms in them, mostly. There were

some floors where you couldn't stop the car and get off unless you had a special

card to swipe through the slot below the numbers. When the elevator came to

those locked-off floors, the number in the window was replaced by an X.

"I think," Roland said, "we need to find the Beam again."

"I'm convinced," Eddie said. "Come on, let's get going." He took a couple of steps,

then turned back to Roland with one eye?brow raised. "Where?"

"The way we were go?ing," Roland said, as if that should have been ob?vi?ous, and

walked past Ed?die in his dusty, bro?ken boots, head?ed for the park across the way.

CHAP?TER V

TURN?PIKIN'

1

Roland walked to the end of the plat?form, kick?ing bits of pink met?al out of his way

as he went. At the stairs, he paused and looked back at them somber?ly. "Mare

dead. Be ready."

"They're not. . . um ... run?ny, are they?" Jake asked.

Roland frowned, then his face cleared as he un?der?stood what Jake meant. "No. Not

run?ny. Dry."

"That's all right, then," Jake said, but he held his hand out to Su?sana, who was

be?ing car?ried by Ed?die for the time be?ing. She gave him a smile and fold?ed her

fin?gers around his.

At the foot of the stairs lead?ing down to the com?muter park?ing lot at the side of the

sta?tion, half a dozen corpses lay to?geth?er like a col?lapsed corn?shock. Two were

wom?en, three were men. The sixth was a child in a stroller. A sum?mer spent dead

in the sun and rain and heat (not to men?tion at the mer?cy of any stray cats, coons,

or wood?chucks that might be pass ing) had giv?en the tod?dler a look of an?cient

wis?dom and mys?tery, like a child mum?my dis?cov?ered in an In?can pyra?mid. Jake

sup?posed from the fad?ed blue out?fit it was wear?ing that it had been a boy, but it

was im?pos?si ble to tell for sure. Eye?less, li?pless, its skin fad?ed to dusky gray, it

made a joke of gen?der—why did the dead ba?by cross the road? Be?cause it was

sta?pled to the su?per?flu.

Even so, the tod?dler seemed to have voy?aged through Tope?ka's emp?ty post?-?plague

months bet?ter than the adults around it. They were lit tle more than skele?tons with

hair. In a scrawny bunch of skin-?wrapped bones that had once been fin?gers, one of

the men clutched the han?dle of a suit?case that looked like the Sam?sonites Jake's

par?ents owned. As with the ba?by (as with all of them), his eyes were gone; huge

dark sock?ets stared at Jake. Be?low them, a ring of dis?col?ored teeth jut?ted in a

pug?na?cious grin. What took you so long, kid? the dead man who was still

clutch ing his suit?case seemed to be ask?ing. Been wait?ing for you, and it's been a

long hot sum?mer!

Where were you guys hop?ing to go? Jake won?dered. Just where in the crispy crap

did you think might be safe enough? Des Moines? Sioux City? Far?go? The moon?

They went down the stairs, Roland first, the oth?ers be?hind him, Jake still hold?ing

Su?san?nah's hand with Oy at his heels. The long-?bod?ied bum?bler seemed to

de?scend each step in two stages, like a dou?ble trail?er tak?ing speed-?bumps.

"Slow down, Roland," Ed?die said. "I want to check the crip spaces be?fore we go

on. We might get lucky."

"Crip spaces?" Su?san?nah said. "What're those?"

Jake shrugged. He didn't know. Nei?ther did Roland.

Su?san?nah switched her at?ten?tion to Ed?die. "I on?ly ask, sug?arpie, be cause it sounds

a lit?tle on-?pleas?ant. You know, like call?ing Ne?groes 'blacks' or gay folks 'fruits.' I

know I'm just a poor ig?no?rant pick?anin?ny from the dark ages of 1964, but—"

"There." Ed?die point?ed at a rank of signs mark?ing the park?ing-?row clos?est to the

sta?tion. There were ac?tu?al?ly two signs to a post, the top of each pair blue and

white, the bot?tom red and white. When they drew a lit tle clos?er, Jake saw the one

on top was a wheelchair sym?bol. The one on the bot?tom was a warn?ing: \$200 fine

for im?prop?er use of hand?icapped PARK?ING SPACE. STRICT?LY EN?FORCED

BY TOPE?KA P.D.

"See there!" Su?san?nah said tri?umphant?ly. "They shoul?da done that a long time

ago! Why, back in my when, you're lucky if you can get your damn wheelchair

through the doors of any?thing small?er than the Shop 'n Save. Hell, lucky if you can

get it up over the curbs! And spe?cial park?ing? For?get it, sug?ar!"

The lot was jammed al?most to ca?pac?ity, but even with the end of the world at

hand, on?ly two cars that didn't have lit?tle wheelchair sym?bols on their li?cense

plates were parked in the row Ed?die had called "the cripp spaces."

Jake guessed that re?spect?ing the "cripp spaces" was just one of those things that got

a mys?te?rious life?long hold on peo?ple, like putting zip?codes on let?ters, part?ing your

hair, or brush?ing your teeth be?fore break?fast.

"And there it is!" Ed?die cried. "Hold your cards, folks, but I think we have a

Bin?go!"

Still car?ry?ing Su?san?nah on his hip—a thing he would have been in?ca pable of

do?ing for any ex?tend?ed pe?ri?od of time even a month ago—Ed?die hur?ried over to a

boat of a Lin?coln. Strapped on the roof was a com?pli?cat?ed?look?ing rac?ing bi?cy?cle;

pok?ing out of the half?open trunk was a wheelchair. Nor was this the on?ly one;

scan?ning the row of "cripp spaces," Jake saw at least four more wheelchairs, most

strapped to roof?racks, some stuffed in?to the backs of vans or sta?tion wag?ons, one

(it looked an?cient and fear?some?ly bulky) thrown in?to the bed of a pick?up truck.

Ed?die set Su?san?nah down and bent to ex?am?ine the rig hold?ing the chair in the

trunk. There were a lot of criss?cross?ing elas?tic cords, plus some sort of lock?ing

bar. Ed?die drew the Ruger Jake had tak?en from his fa?ther's desk draw?er. "Fire in

the hole," he said cheer?ful?ly, and be?fore any of them could even think of cov?er?ing

their ears, he pulled the trig?ger and blew the lock off the se?

cu?ri?ty-?bar. The sound

went rolling in?to the si?lence, then echoed back. The war?bling sound of the thin?ny

re?turned with it, as if the gun?shot had snapped it awake. Sounds Hawai?ian, doesn't

it? Jake thought, and gri?maced with dis?taste. Half an hour ago, he wouldn't have

be?lieved that a sound could be as phys?ical?ly up?set?ting, as ... well, the smell of

rot?ting meat, say, but he be?lieved it now. He looked up at the turn?pike signs. From

this an?gle he could see on?ly their tops, but that was enough to con?firm that they

were shim?mer?ing again. It throws some kind of field, Jake thought. The way mix?ers

and vac?uum clean?ers make stat?ic on the ra?dio or TV, or the way that cy?clotron

gad?get made the hair on my arms stand up when Mr. Kingery brought it to class

and then asked for vol?un?teers to come up and stand next to it.

Ed?die wrenched the lock?ing bar aside, and used Roland's knife to cut the elas?tic

cords. Then he drew the wheelchair out of the trunk, ex?am?ined it, un?fold?ed it, and

en?gaged the sup?port which ran across the back at seat-?lev?el. "Voila!" he said.

Su?sana?nah had propped her?self on one hand—Jake thought she looked a lit?tle like

the wom?an in this An?drew Wyeth paint?ing he liked, Chris tina 's World—and was

ex?am?in?ing the chair with some won?der.

"God almighty, it looks so lit?tle 'n light!"

"Mo?dem tech?nol?ogy at its finest, dar?lin," Ed?die said. "It's what we fought Viet?nam

for. Hop in." He bent to help her. She didn't re?sist him, but her face was set and

frown?ing as he low?ered her in?to the seat. Like she ex?pect?ed the chair to col?lapse

un?der her, Jake thought. As she ran her hands over the arms of her new ride, her

face grad?ual?ly re?laxed.

Jake wan?dered off a lit?tle, walk?ing down an?oth?er row of cars, run?ning his fin?gers

over their hoods, leav?ing trails of dust. Oy padded af?ter him, paus?ing once to lift

his leg and squirt a tire, as if he had been doing it all his life.

"Make you home? sick, hon?ey?" Su?san?nah asked from behind Jake. "Prob?ably thought you'd nev?er see an hon?est-to-God Amer?ican au?tomobile again, am I right?"

Jake consid?ered this and decid?ed she was not right. It had nev?er crossed his mind

that he would remain in Roland's world forever; that he might nev?er see another

car. He didn't think that would bother him, actually, but he also didn't think it was

in the cards. Not yet, anyway. There was a certain vacant lot in the New York

when he had come from. It was on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth

Street. Once there had been a deli there—Tom and Ger?ry's, Par?ty Plat?ters Our

Spe?cial?ty—but now it was just rubble, and weeds, and broken glass, and ...

... and a rose. Just a single wild rose growing in a vacant lot where a bunch of

condos were scheduled to go up at some point, but Jake had an idea that there was

nothing quite like it growing anywhere else on Earth. Maybe not on any of those

other worlds Roland had mentioned, either. There were roses as one approached

the Dark Tower; roses by the billion, according to Eddie, great bloody acres of

them. He had seen them in a dream. Still, Jake suspected that his rose was

different even from those . . . and that until its fate was decided, one way or the

other, he was not done with the world of cars and TVs and police?men who wanted

to know if you had any identification and what your parents' names were.

And speaking of parents, I may not be done with them, either, Jake thought. The

idea hurried his heart?beat with a mixture of hope and alarm.

They stopped halfway down the row of cars, Jake staring blankly across a wide

street (Gage Boulevard, he assumed) as he considered these things. Now Roland

and Ed?die caught up to them.

"This ba?by's gonna be great af?ter a cou?ple of months push?ing the Iron Maid?en,"

Ed?die said with a grin. "Bet you could damn near puff it along." He blew a deep

breath at the back of the wheelchair to demon?strate. Jake thought of telling Ed?die

that there were prob?ably oth?ers back there in the "crip spaces" with mo?tors in

them, then re?alized what Ed?die must have known right away: their bat?ter?ies would

be dead.

Su?sana?nah ig?nored him for the time be?ing; it was Jake she was in?ter est?ed in. "You

didn't an?swer me, sug. All these cars get you home?sick?"

"Nah. But I was cu?rious about whether or not they were all cars I knew. I thought

maybe . . . if this ver?sion of 1986 grew out of some oth?er world than my 1977,

there'd be a way to tell. But I can't tell. Be?cause things change so dam fast. Even

in nine years .. " He shrugged, then looked at Ed?die. "You might be able to,

though. I mean, you ac?tu?al?ly lived in 1986."

Ed?die grunt?ed. "I lived through it, but I didn't ex?act?ly ob?serve it. I was fucked to

the sky most of the time. Still... I sup?pose . . ."

Ed?die start?ed push?ing Su?sana?nah along the smooth macadam of the park?ing lot

again, point?ing to cars as they passed them. "Ford Ex?plor?er ... Chevro?let Caprice . .

. and that one there's an old Pon?ti?ac, you can tell be cause of the split grille—"

"Pon?ti?ac Bon?neville," Jake said. He was amused and a lit?tle touched by the

won?der in Su?sana?nah's eyes—most of these cars must look as fu?tur is?tic to her as

Buck Rogers scout?ships. That made him won?der how Roland felt about them, and

Jake looked around.

The gun?slinger showed no in?ter?est in the cars at all. He was gaz?ing across the

street, in?to the park, to?ward the turn?pike . . . ex?cept Jake didn't think he was

ac?tu?al?ly look?ing at any of those things. Jake had an idea

that Roland was sim?ply

look?ing in?to his own thoughts. If so, the ex?pres?sion on his face sug?gest?ed that he

wasn't find?ing any?thing good there.

"That's one of those lit?tle Chrysler K's," Ed?die said, point?ing, "and that's a Sub?aru.

Mer?cedes SEL 450, ex?cel?lent, the car of cham?pi?ons . . . Mus?tang . . . Chrysler

Im?pe?ri?al, good shape but must be old?er'n God—"

"Watch it, boy," Su?sana?nah said, with a touch of what Jake thought was re?al

as?per?ity in her voice. "I rec?og?nize that one. Looks new to me."

"Sor?ry, Suze. Re?al?ly. This one's a Cougar . . . an?oth?er Chevy . . . and one more . . .

Top?ka loves Gen?er?al Mo?tors, big fuckin sur?prise there . . . Hon?da Civic . . . VW

Rab?bit... a Dodge . . . a Ford . . . a—"

Ed?die stopped, look?ing at a lit?tle car near the end of the row, white with red trim.

"A Takuro," he said, most?ly to him?self. He went around to look at the trunk. "A

Takuro Spir?it, to be ex?act. Ev?er hear of that make and mod?el, Jake of New York?"

Jake shook his head.

"Me, nei?ther," he said. "Me fuck?ing nei?ther."

Ed?die be?gan push?ing Su?sana?nah to?ward Gage Boule?vard (Roland with them but

still most?ly off in his own pri?vate world, walk?ing when they walked, stop?ping

where they stopped). Just shy of the lot's au?to?mat?ed en trance (stop TAKE

TICK?ET), Ed?die halt?ed.

"At this rate, we'll be old be?fore we get to yon?der park and dead be fore we raise

the turn?pike," Su?sana?nah said.

This time Ed?die didn't apol?ogize, didn't seem even to hear her. He was look?ing at

the bumper stick?er on the front of a rusty old AMC Pac?er. The stick?er was blue

and white, like the lit?tle wheelchair signs mark?ing the "crip spaces." Jake squat?ed

for a bet?ter look, and when Oy dropped his head on Jake's knee, the boy stroked

him ab?scent?ly. With his oth?er hand he reached out and

touched the stick?er, as if to

ver?ify its re?al?ity. Kansas City Monar?chs, it said. The 0 in Monar?chs was a base?ball

with speed?lines drawn out be?hind it, as if it were leav?ing the park.

Ed?die said: "Check me if I'm wrong on this, sport, be?cause I know al most zilch

about base?ball west of Yan?kee Sta?di?um, but shouldn't that say Kansas City

Roy?als? You know, George Brett and all that?"

Jake nod?ded. He knew the Roy?als, and he knew Brett, al? though he had been a

young play?er in Jake's when and must have been a fair?ly old one in Ed?die's.

"Kansas City Ath?let?ics, you mean," Su?sana?nah said, sound? ing be?wil dered. Roland

ig?nored it all; he was still cruis?ing in his own per?son?al ozone lay?er.

"Not by '86, dar?lin," Ed?die said kind?ly. "By '86 the Ath?let? ics were in Oak?land." He

glanced from the bumper stick?er to Jake. "Mi?nor-?league team, maybe?" he asked.

"Triple A?"

"The Triple A Roy?als are still the Roy?als," Jake said. "They play in Om?aha. Come on, let's go."

And al?though he didn't know about the oth?ers, Jake him?self went on with a lighter

heart. Maybe it was stupid, but he was re?lieved. He didn't be? lieve that this ter?ri?ble

plague was wait?ing up ahead for his world, be cause there were no Kansas City

Monar?chs in his world. Maybe that wasn't enough in?for?ma? tion up?on which to base

a con?clu?sion, but it felt true. And it was an enor?mous re?lief to be able to be?lieve

that his moth?er and fa?ther weren't slat?ed to die of a germ peo?ple called Cap?tain

Trips and be burned in a ... a land?fill, or some?thing.

Ex?cept that wasn't quite a sure thing, even if this wasn't the 1986 ver sion of his

1977 world. Be?cause even if this aw?ful plague had hap?pened in a world where

there were cars called Takuro Spir?its and George Brett played for the K.C.

Monarchs, Roland said the trouble was spreading . . . that things like the superflu

were eating through the fabric of existence like battery acid eating its way into a piece of cloth.

The gunslinger had spoken of time's pool, a phrase which had at first struck Jake

as romantic and charming. But suppose the pool was growing stagnant and

swampy? And suppose these Bermuda Triangle-type things Roland called

thinies, once great rarities, were becoming the rule rather than the exception?

Suppose—oh, and here was a hideous thought, one guaranteed to keep you lying

awake until way past three—all of reality was sagging as the structural weaknesses

of the Dark Tower grew? Suppose there came a crash, one level falling down into

the next... and the next... and the next... until—

When Ed die grasped his shoulder and squeezed, Jake had to bite his tongue to

keep from screaming.

"You're giving yourself the hoodoos," Ed die said.

"What do you know about it?" Jake asked. That sounded rude, but he was mad.

From being scared or being seen into? He didn't know. Didn't much care, either.

"When it comes to the hoodoos, I'm an old hand," Ed die said. "I don't know

exactly what's on your mind, but whatever it is, this would be an excellent time to

stop thinking about it."

That, Jake decided, was probably good advice. They walked across the street

together. Toward Gage Park and one of the greatest shocks of Jake's life.

2

Passing under the wrought-iron arch with gage park written on it in old-fashioned,

curlicued letters, they found themselves on a brick path leading through a garden

that was half English Formal and half Ecuadorian jungle. With no one to tend it

through the hot Midwestern summer, it had run riot; with

no one to tend it this

fall, it had run to seed. A sign just inside the arch proclaimed this to be the

Reinisch Rose Garden, and there were roses, all right; roses everywhere. Most had

gone over, but some of the wild ones still thrived, making Jake think of the rose in

the vacant lot at Forty-sixth and Second with a long, so deep it was an ache.

Off to one side as they entered the park was a beautiful old-time carousel, its

prancing steeds and racing stallions now still on their posts. The carousel's very

silence, its flashing lights and steamy caliope music stilled forever, gave Jake a

chill. Hung over the neck of one horse, dangling from a rawhide strip, was some

kid's baseball glove. Jake was barely able to look at it.

Beyond the carousel, the foliage grew even thicker, straggling the path until the

travelers edged along single-file, like lost children in a fairy-tale wood. Thorns

from overgrown and unpruned rosebushes tore at Jake's clothes. He had somehow

got into the lead (probably because Roland was still deep inside his own

thoughts), and that was why he saw Charlie the Choo-Choo first.

His only thought while approaching the narrow-gauge train-tracks which crossed

the path—they were little more than toy tracks, really—was of the gunslinger

saying that ka was like a wheel, always rolling around to the same place again. We

're haunted by roses and trains, he thought. Why? I don't know. I guess it's just

another ride—

Then he looked to his left, and "Oh-godnesstoChrist" fell out of his mouth, all in

one word. The strength ran out of his legs and he sat down. His voice sounded

watery and distant to his own ears. He didn't quite faint, but the color drained out

of the world until the running-to-riot foliage on the west side of the park looked

al?most as gray as the au?umn sky over?head.

“Jake! Jake, what’s wrong!” It was Ed?die, and Jake could hear the gen?uine con?cern

in his voice, but it seemed to be com?ing over a bad long?dis? tance con?nec?tion.

From Beirut, say, or maybe Uranus. And he could feel Roland’s steady?ing hand on

his shoul?der, but it was as dis?tant as Ed die’s voice.

“Jake!” Su?san?nah. “What’s wrong, hon?ey? What—”

Then she saw, and stopped talk?ing at him. Ed?die saw, and al? so stopped talk?ing at

him. Roland’s hand fell away. They all stood look?ing ... ex?cept for Jake, who sat

look?ing. He sup?posed that strength and feel?ing would come back in?to his legs

even?tu?al?ly and he would get up, but right now they felt like limp mac?aroni.

The train was parked fifty feet up, by a toy sta?tion that mim? icked the one across

the street. Hang?ing from its eaves was a sign which read tope? ka. The train was

Char?lie the Choo?Choo, cow?catch?er and all; a 402 Big Boy Steam Lo?co?mo?tive.

And, Jake knew, if he found enough strength to get up on his feet and go over

there, he would find a fam?ily of mice nest?ed in the seat where the en?gi?neer (whose

name had un?doubt?ed?ly been Bob Some?thing?or?oth?er) had once sat. There would

he an?oth?er fam?ily, this one of swal?lows, nest?ed in the smokestack.

And the dark, oily tears, Jake thought, look?ing at the tiny train wait ing in front of

its tiny sta?tion with his skin crawl?ing all over his body and his balls hard and his

stom?ach in a knot. At night it cries those dark, oily tears, and they’re rust?ing the

hell out of his fine Stratham head?light. But in your time, Char? lie?boy, you pulled

your share of kids, right? Around and around Gage Park you went, and the kids

laughed, ex?cept some of them weren’t re?al?ly laugh?ing; some of them, the ones who

were wise to you, were scream?ing. The way I’d scream now, if I had the strength.

But his strength was coming back, and when Ed died put a hand under one of his

arms and Roland put one under the other, Jake was able to get up. He staggered once, then stood steady.

“Just for the record, I don’t blame you,” Ed died said. His voice was grim; so was his

face. “I feel a little like falling over myself. That’s the one in your book; that’s it to the life.”

“So now we know where Miss Beryl Evans got the idea for Charlie the Choo-

Choo” Susanah said. “Either she lived here, or sometime before 1942, when the

damned thing was published, she visited Topeka—”

“—and saw the kids’ train that goes through Reinisch Rose Garden and around

Gage Park,” Jake said. He was getting over his scare now, and he—not just an

only child but for most of his life a lonely child—felt a burst of love and gratitude

for his friends. They had seen what he had seen, they had understood the source of

his fright. Of course—they were ka-tet.

“It won’t answer silly questions, it won’t play silly games,” Roland said musically.

“Can you go on, Jake?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?” Ed died asked, and when Jake nodded, Ed died pushed Susanah across

the tracks. Roland went next. Jake paused a moment, remembering a dream he’d

had—he and Oy had been at a train-crossing, and the bumper had suddenly leaped

on to the tracks, barking wildly at the oncoming headlight.

Now Jake bent and scooped Oy up. He looked at the rusting train standing silently

in its station, its dark headlamp like a dead eye. “I’m not afraid,” he said in a low

voice. “Not afraid of you.”

The headlamp came to life and flashed at him once, brief but glare-bright,

emphatic: I know difference; I know difference, my dear little squint.

Then it went out.

None of the others had seen. Jake glanced once more at the train, expecting the light to flash again—maybe expecting the cursed thing to actually start up and make a run at him—but nothing happened. Heart thumping hard in his chest, Jake hurried after his companions.

3

The Topeka Zoo (the World Famous Topeka Zoo, according to the signs) was full

of empty cages and dead animals. Some of the animals that had been freed were

gone, but others had died near to hand. The big apes were still in the area marked

Go-rilla Habbitat, and they appeared to have died hand-in-hand. That made Ed die

feel like crying, somehow. Since the last of the hero-in had washed out of his

system, his emotions always seemed on the verge of blowing up into a cyclone.

His old pals would have laughed.

Beyond Go-rilla Habbitat, a gray wolf lay dead on the path. Oy approached it

carefully, sniffed, then stretched out his long neck and began to howl.

“Make him quit that, Jake, you hear me?” Ed die said gruffly. He suddenly

realized he could smell decaying animals. The aroma was faint, mostly boiled off

over the hot days of the summer just passed, but what was left made him feel like

upchucking. Not that he could precisely remember the last time he’d eaten.

“Oy! To me!”

Oy howled one final time, then returned to Jake. He stood on the kid’s feet,

looking up at him with those spooky wedding-ring eyes of his. Jake picked him

up, took him in a circle around the wolf, and then set him down again on the brick

path.

The path led them to a steep set of steps (weeds had begun to push through the

stonework already), and at the top Roland looked back over the zoo and the

gar?dens. From here they could eas?ily see the cir?cuit the toy train-?tracks made,

al?low?ing Char?lie's rid?ers to tour the en?tire per?ime ter of Gage Park. Be?yond it,

fall?en leaves clat?tered down Gage Boule?vard be?fore a rush of cold wind.

"So fell Lord Perth," mur?mured Roland.

"And the coun?try?side did shake with that thun?der," Jake fin?ished.

Roland looked down at him with sur?prise, like a man awak?en?ing from a deep

sleep, then smiled and put an arm around Jake's shoul?ders. "I have played Lord

Perth in my time," he said.

"Have you?"

"Yes. Very soon now you shall hear."

4

Be?yond the steps was an aviary full of dead ex?ot?ic birds; be?yond the aviary was a

snack?bar ad?ver?tis?ing (per?haps heart?less?ly, giv?en the lo?ca tion) tope?ka's best

buf?faloburg?er; be?yond the snack?bar was an?oth?er wrought iron arch with a sign

read?ing come back to gage park re?al soon! Be?yond this was the curv?ing up?slope of

a lim?it?ed-?ac?cess-?high?way en?trance ramp. Above it, the green signs they had first

spot?ted from across the way stood clear.

"Tumpikin' again," Ed?die said in a voice al?most too low to hear. "God?dam." Then

he sighed.

"What's tumpikin', Ed?die?"

Jake didn't think Ed?die was go?ing to an?swer; when Su?san?nah craned around to

look at him as he stood with his fin?gers wrapped around the han?dles of the new

wheelchair, Ed?die looked away. Then he looked back, first at Su?san?nah, then at

Jake. "It's not pret?ty. Not much about my life be fore Gary Coop?er here yanked me

across the Great Di?vide was."

"You don't have to—"

"It's al?so no big deal. A bunch of us would get to?geth?er—me, my broth?er Hen?ry,

Bum O'Hara, usu?al?ly, 'cause he had a car, San?dra Cor?bitt,

and maybe this friend of

Hen?ry's we called Jim?mie Po?lio—and we'd stick all our names in a hat. The one

we drew out was the ... the trip-?guide, Hen?ry used to call him. He—she, if it was

San?di—had to stay straight. Rel?ative?ly, any?way. Ev?ery?one else got se?ri?ous?ly

goobered. Then we'd all pile in?to Bum's Chrysler and go up 1-95 in?to Con?necti?cut

or maybe take the Tacon?ic Park?way in?to up?state New York . . . on?ly we called it

the Cata?ton?ic Park?way. Lis?ten to Cree?dence or Mar?vin Gaye or maybe even Elvis

's Great?est Hits on the tape-?play?er.

“It was bet?ter at night, best when the moon was full. We'd cruise for hours

some?times with our heads stuck out the win?dows like dogs do when they're rid?ing,

look?ing up at the moon and watch?ing for shoot?ing stars. We called it tumpikin'.”

Ed?die smiled. It looked like an ef?fort. “A charm ing life, folks.”

“It sounds sort of fun,” Jake said. “Not the drug part, I mean, but rid ing around

with your pals at night, look?ing at the moon and lis?ten?ing to the mu?sic . . . that

sounds ex?cel?lent.”

“It was, ac?tu?al?ly,” Ed?die said. “Even stuffed so full of reds we were as apt to pee

on our own shoes as in the bush?es, it was ex?cel?lent.” He paused. “That's the

hor?ri?ble part, don't you get it?”

“Tumpikin',” the gun?slinger said. “Let's do some.”

They left Gage Park and crossed the road to the en?trance ramp.

5

Some?one had spray-?paint?ed over both signs mark?ing the ramp's as?cend ing curve.

On the one read?ing st. louis 215, some?one had slashed

in black. On the one marked next rest area 10 mi.,

had been writ?ten in fat red let?ters. That scar?let was still bright enough to scream

even af?ter an en?tire sum?mer. Each had been dec?orat?ed with a sym?bol—

“Do you know what any of that truck means, Roland?” Su?san? nah asked. Roland

shook his head, but he looked trou?bled, and that in?tro?spec?

tive look nev?er left his

own eyes. They went on.

6

At the place where the ramp merged with the turn?pike, the two men, the boy, and

the bum?bler clus?tered around Su?san?nah in her new wheelchair. All of them looked east.

Ed?die didn't know what the traf?fic sit?ua?tion would be like once they cleared

Tope?ka, but here all the lanes, those head?ed west as well as the east?bound ones on

their side, were crammed with cars and trucks. Most of the ve?hi?cles were piled

high with pos?ses?sions gone rusty with a sea?son's worth of rain.

But the traf?fic was the least of their con?cerns as they stood there, look?ing silent?ly

east?ward. For half a mile or so on ei?ther side of them, the city con?tin?ued—they

could see church steeples, a strip of fast food places (Ar?by's, Wendy's, McD's,

Piz?za Hut, and one Ed?die had nev?er heard of called Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers), car

deal?er?ships, the roof of a bowl?ing al?ley called Heart?land Lanes. They could see

an?oth?er turn?pike ex?it ahead, the sign by the ramp read?ing Tope?ka State Hos?pi?tal

and S.W. 6th. Be?yond the off-ramp there bulked a mas?sive old red brick ed?ifice

with tiny win?dows peer?ing like des?per?ate eyes out of the climb?ing ivy. Ed?die

fig?ured a place that looked so much like At?ti?ca had to be a hos?pi?tal, prob?ably the

kind of wel?fare pur?ga?to?ry where poor folks sat in shit?ty plas?tic chairs for hours on

end, all so some doc?tor could look at them like they were dogshit.

Be?yond the hos?pi?tal, the city abrupt?ly end?ed and the thin?ny be?gan.

To Ed?die, it looked like flat wa?ter stand?ing in a vast marsh?land. It crowd?ed up to

the raised bar?rel of 1-70 on both sides, sil?very and shim mer?ing, mak?ing the signs

and guardrails and stalled cars wa?ver like mi rages; it gave off

that liq?uidy

hum?ming sound like a stench.

Su?san?nah put her hands to her ears, her mouth drawn down.

“I don’t know as I can

stand it. Re?al?ly. I don’t mean to be splee?ny, but al?ready I feel like vom?it?ing, and I

haven’t had any?thing to eat all day.”

Ed?die felt the same way. Yet, sick as he felt he could hard?ly take his eyes away

from the thin?ny. It was as if un?re?al?ity had been giv?en . . . what? A face? No. The

vast and hum?ming sil?ver shim?mer ahead of them had no face, was the very

an?tithe?sis of a face, in fact, but it had a body ... an as?pect ... a pres?ence.

Yes; that last was best. It had a pres?ence, as the de?mon which had come to the

cir?cle of stones while they were try?ing to draw Jake had had a pres?ence.

Roland, mean?while, was rum?mag?ing in the depths of his purse. He ap?peared to dig

all the way to the bot?tom be?fore find?ing what he want?ed: a fist?ful of bul?lets. He

plucked Su?san?nah’s right hand off the arm of her chair, and put two of the bul?lets

in her palm. Then he took two more and poked them, slug ends first, in?to his ears.

Su?san?nah looked first amazed, then amused, then doubt?ful. In the end, she

fol?lowed his ex?am?ple. Al?most at once an ex?pres?sion of bliss?ful re?lief filled her face.

Ed?die un?shoul?dered the pack he wore and pulled out the half?full box of .44s that

went with Jake’s Ruger. The gun?slinger shook his head and held out his hand.

There were still four bul?lets in it, two for Ed?die and two for Jake.

“What’s wrong with these?” Ed?die shook a cou?ple of shells from the box that had

come from be?hind the hang?ing files in Elmer Cham?bers’s desk draw?er.

“They’re from your world and they won’t block out the sound. Don’t ask me how I

know that; I just do. Try them if you want, but they won’t

work.”

Ed died point ed at the bullets Roland was offering. “Those are from our world, too.

The gun-shop on Seventh and Forty-ninth. Clements’, wasn’t that the name?”

“These didn’t come from there. These are mine, Ed died, reload ed often but

originally brought from the green land. From Gilead.”

“You mean the wets?” Ed died asked incredulously. “The last of the wet shells from

the beach. The ones that really got soaked?”

Roland nodded.

“You said those would never fire again! No matter how dry they got! That the

powder had been . . . what did you say? ‘Flattened.’ ”

Roland nodded again.

“So why’d you save them? Why bring a bunch of useless bullets all this way?”

“What did I teach you to say after a kill, Ed died? In order to focus your mind?”

“Fa ther, guide my hands and heart so that no part of the animal will be wasted.” “

Roland nodded a third time. Jake took two shells and put them in his ears. Ed died

took the last two, but first he tried the ones he’d shaken from the box. They

muffled the sound of the thinny, but it was still there, vibrating in the center of his

forehead, making his eyes water the way they did when he had a cold, making the

bridge of his nose feel like it was going to explode. He picked them out, and put

the bigger slugs—the ones from Roland’s ancient revolvers—in their place.

Putting bullets in my ears, he thought. Ma would shit. But that didn’t matter. The

sound of the thinny was gone—or at least down to a distant drone—and that was

what did. When he turned and spoke to Roland, he expected his own voice to

sound muffled, the way it did when you were wearing earplugs, but he found he

could hear himself pretty well.

“Is there anything you don’t know?” he asked Roland.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Quite a lot.”

“What about Oy?” Jake asked.

“Oy will be fine, I think,” Roland said. “Come on, let’s make some miles before dark.”

7

Oy didn’t seem bothered by the warble of the thinny, but he stuck close to Jake

Chambers all that afternoon, looking mistrustfully at the stalled cars which

clogged the eastbound lanes of 1-70. And yet, Susanah saw, those cars did not

clog the highway completely. The congestion eased as the travelers left

downtown behind them, but even where the traffic had been heavy, some of the

dead vehicles had been pulled to one side or the other; a number had been pushed

right off the highway and onto the median strip, which was a concrete divider in

the metro area and grass outside of town.

Somebody’s been at work with a wrecker, that’s my guess, Susanah thought. The

idea made her happy. No one would have bothered clearing a path down the

center of the highway while the plague was still raging, and if someone had done

it after—if someone had been around to do it after—that meant the plague hadn’t

gotten everyone; those crammed-together obituaries weren’t the whole story.

There were corpses in some of the cars, but they, like the ones at the foot of the

station steps, were dry, not runny—mummies wearing seat-belts, for the most part.

The majority of the cars were empty. A lot of the drivers and passengers caught in

the traffic jams had probably tried to walk out of the plague-zone, she supposed,

but she guessed that wasn’t the only reason they had taken to their feet.

Susanah knew that she herself would have to be chained to the steering wheel to

keep her inside a car once she felt the symptoms of some fatal disease setting in;

if she was going to die, she would want to do it in God’s open

air. A hill would be

best, some?place with a lit?tle el?eva?tion, but even a wheat?field would do, came it to

that. Any?thing but cough?ing your last while smelling the air?-fresh?en?er dan?gling

from the rearview mir?ror.

At one time Su?san?nah guessed they would have been able to see many of the

corpses of the flee?ing dead, but not now. Be?cause of the thin?ny. They ap?proached

it steadi?ly, and she knew ex?act?ly when they en?tered it. A kind of tin?gling shud?der

ran through her body, mak?ing her draw her short?ened legs up, and the wheelchair

stopped for a mo?ment. When she turned around she saw Roland, Ed?die, and Jake

hold?ing their stom?achs and gri?mac?ing. They looked as if they had all been strick?en

with the belly?ache at the same time. Then Ed?die and Roland straight?ened up. Jake

bent to stroke Oy, who had been star?ing at him anx?ious?ly.

“You boys all right?” Su?san?nah asked. The ques?tion came out in the half-

queru?lous, half-?hu?mor?ous voice of Det?ta Walk?er. Us?ing that voice was noth?ing she

planned; some?times it just came out.

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Feels like I got a bub?ble in my throat, though.” He was star?ing

un?easi?ly at the thin?ny. Its sil?very blank?ness was all around them now, as if the

whole world had turned in?to a flat Nor?folk fen at dawn. Near?by, trees poked out of

its sil?ver sur?face, cast?ing dis?tort?ed re flec?tions that nev?er stayed quite still or quite

in fo?cus. A lit?tle far?ther away, Su?san?nah could see a grain-?stor?age tow?er, seem?ing

to float. The words gad?dish feeds were writ?ten on the side in pink let?ters which

might have been red un?der nor?mal con?di?tions.

“Feels to me like I got a bub?ble in my mind,” Ed?die said. “Man, look at that shit

shim?mer.”

“Can you still hear it?” Su?san?nah asked.

“Yeah. But faint. I can live with it. Can you?”

“Uh-?huh. Let’s go.”

It was like rid?ing in an open-?cock?pit plane through bro?ken clouds, Su san?nah

de?cid?ed. They'd go for what felt like miles through that hum?ming bright?ness that

was not quite fog and not quite wa?ter, some?times see?ing shapes (a bam, a trac?tor, a

Stuck?ey's bill?board) loom out of it, then los?ing ev?ery?thing but the road, which ran

con?sis?tent?ly above the thin?ny's bright but some?how in?dis?tinct sur?face.

Then, all at once, they would run in?to the clear. The hum?ming would fall away to

a faint drone; you could even un?plug your ears and not be too both?ered, at least

un?til you got near the oth?er side of the break. Once again there were vis?tas ...

Well, no, that was too grand, Kansas didn't ex?act?ly have vis?tas, but there were

open fields and the oc?ca?sion?al copse of au?tumn-?bright trees mark?ing a spring or

cow-?pond. No Grand Canyon or surf crash?ing on Port?land Head?light, hut at least

you could see a by-?God hori?zon off in the dis?tance, and lose some of that

un?pleas?ant feel?ing of en?tomb?ment. Then, back in?to the goop you went. Jake came

clos?est to de?scrib?ing it, she thought, when he said that be?ing in the thin?ny was like

fi?nal?ly reach?ing the shin?ing wa?ter-?mi?rage you could of?ten see far up the high?way

on hot days.

What?ev?er it was and how?ev?er you de?scribed it, be?ing in?side it was claus?tro?pho?bic,

pur?ga?to?ri?al, all the world gone ex?cept for the twin bar?rels of the turn?pike and the

hulks of the cars, like derelict ships aban?doned on a frozen ocean.

Please help us get out of this, Su?san?nah prayed to a God in whom she no longer

pre?cise?ly be?lieved—she still be?lieved in some?thing, but since awak?en?ing to

Roland's world on the beach of the West?ern Sea, her con?cept of the in?vis?ible

world had changed con?sid?er?ably. Please help us find the Beam again. Please help

us escape this world of silence and death.

They ran into the biggest clear space they had yet come to near a road sign which

read Big Springs 2 mi. Behind them, in the west, the setting sun shone through a

brief rift in the clouds, skipping scarlet splinters across the top of the thinny and

lighting the windows and tail lights of the stalled cars in tones of fire. On either

side of them empty fields stretched away. Full Earth come and gone, Susanah

thought. Reaping come and gone, too. This is what Roland calls closing the year.

The thought made her shiver.

"We'll camp here for the night," Roland said soon after they had passed the Big

Springs exit ramp. Up ahead they could see the thinny encroaching on the

highway again, but that was miles farther on—you could see a damn long way in

eastern Kansas, Susanah was discovering. "We can get firewood without going

too near the thinny, and the sound won't be too bad. We may even be able to sleep

without bullets stuffed into our ears."

Eddie and Jake climbed over the guardrails, descended the bank, and foraged for

wood along a dry creekbed, staying together as Roland admonished them to do.

When they came back, the clouds had gulped the sun again, and an ashy,

unintertesting twilight had begun to creep over the world.

The gunslinger stripped twigs for kindling, then laid his fuel around them in his

usual fashion, building a kind of wooden chimney in the breakdown lane. As he

did it, Eddie strolled across to the median strip and stood there, hands in pockets,

looking east. After a few moments, Jake and Oy joined him.

Roland produced his flint and steel, scraped fire into the shaft of his chimney, and

soon the little campfire was burning.

"Roland!" Eddie called. "Suze! Come over here! Look at this!"

Susanah started rolling her chair toward Eddie, then Roland—after a final check

of his camp?fire—took hold of the han?dles and pushed her.

“Look at what?” Su?san?nah asked.

Ed?die point?ed. At first Su?san?nah saw noth?ing, al?though the turn?pike was per?fect?ly

vis?ible even be?yond the point where the thin?ny closed in again, per?haps three

miles ahead. Then ... yes, she might see some?thing. Maybe. A kind of shape, at the

far?thest edge of vi?sion. If not for the fad ing day?light...

“Is it a build?ing?” Jake asked. “Cripes, it looks like it’s built right across the

high?way!”

“What about it, Roland?” Ed?die asked. “You’ve got the best eyes in the uni?verse.”

For a time the gun?slinger said noth?ing, on?ly looked up the me?di?an strip with his

thumbs hooked in his gun?belt. At last he said, “We’ll see it bet?ter when we get

clos?er.”

“Oh, come on!” Ed?die said. “I mean, holy shit! Do you know what it is or not?”

“We’ll see it bet?ter when we get clos?er,” the gun?slinger re?peat?ed ... which was, of

course, no an?swer at all. He mo?seyed back across the east?bound lanes to check on

his camp?fire, bootheels click?ing on the pave ment. Su?san?nah looked at Jake and

Ed?die. She shrugged. They shrugged back . . . and then Jake burst in?to bright peals

of laugh?ter. Usu?al?ly, Su?san nah thought, the kid act?ed more like an eigh?teen?-year-

old than a boy of eleven, but that laugh?ter made him sound about nine?-go?ing?-on-

ten, and she didn’t mind a bit.

She looked down at Oy, who was look?ing at them earnest?ly and rolling his

shoul?ders in an ef?fort to shrug.

8

They ate the leaf?-wrapped del?ica?cies Ed?die called gun?slinger bur?ri?tos, draw?ing

clos?er to the fire and feed?ing it more wood as the dark drew down. Some?where

south a bird cried out—it was just about the loneli?est sound he had ev?er heard in

his life, Ed?die reck?oned. None of them talked much, and it oc?

curled to him that, at

this time of their day, hardly anyone ever did. As if the time when the earth

swapped day for dark was special, a time that somehow closed them off from the

powerful fellowship Roland called ka-tet.

Jake fed Oy small scraps of dried deer meat from his last bounty; Susanah sat on

her bedroll, legs crossed beneath her hide smock, looking dreamily into the fire;

Roland lay back on his elbows, looking up at the sky, where the clouds had begun

to melt away from the stars. Looking up himself, Eddie saw that Old Star and Old

Mother were gone, their places taken by Polaris and the Big Dipper. This might

not be his world—Takuro and the moobiles, the Kansas City Monarchs, and a food

franchise called Bowling Burgers all suggested it wasn't—but Eddie thought it

was too close for comfort. Maybe, he thought, the world next door.

When the bird cried in the distance again, he roused himself and looked at Roland.

"You had something you were going to tell us," he said. "A thrilling tale of your

youth, I believe. Susan—that was her name, wasn't it?"

For a moment longer the gunslinger continued to look up at the sky—now it was

Roland who must find himself adrift in the constellations, Eddie realized—and

then he shifted his gaze to his friends. He looked strangely apologetic, strangely

uneasy. "Would you think I was confusing," he said, "if I asked for one more day

to think of these things? Or perhaps it's a night to dream of them that I really

want. They are old things, dead things, perhaps, but I . . ." He raised his hands in a

kind of distracted gesture. "Some things don't rest easy even when they're dead.

Their bones cry out from the ground."

"There are ghosts," Jake said, and in his eyes Eddie saw a shadow of the horror he

must have felt inside the house in Dutch Hill. The horror he

must have felt when

the Door?keeper came out of the wall and reached for him.
“Some?times there are
ghosts, and some?times they come back.”

“Yes,” Roland said. “Some?times there are, and some?times they
do.”

“Maybe it’s bet?ter not to brood,” Su?san?nah said. “Some?times
—espe cial?ly when

you know a thing’s go?ing to be hard—it’s bet?ter just to get on
your horse and ride.”

Roland thought this over care?ful?ly, then raised his eyes to look
at her. “At

to?mor?row night’s fire I will tell you of Su?san,” he said. “This I
prom ise on my
fa?ther’s name.”

“Do we need to hear?” Ed?die asked abrupt?ly. He was al?most
as tound?ed to hear

this ques?tion com?ing out of his mouth; no one had been more
cu?ri?ous about the

gun?slinger’s past than Ed?die him?self. “I mean, if it re?al?ly
hurts, Roland . . . hurts

big-?time . . . maybe...”

“I’m not sure you need to hear, but I think I need to tell. Our fu?
ture is the Tow?er,

and to go to?ward it with a whole heart, I must put my past to
rest as best I may.

There’s no way I could tell you all of it—in my world even the
past is in mo?tion,

re?ar?rang?ing it?self in many vi?tal ways—but this one sto?ry
may stand for all the
rest.”

“Is it a West?ern?” Jake asked sud?den?ly.

Roland looked at him, puz?zled. “I don’t take your mean?ing,
Jake. Gilead is a

Barony of the West?ern World, yes, and Mejis as well, but—”

“It’ll be a West?ern,” Ed?die said. “All Roland’s sto?ries are
West?erns, when you get

right down to it.” He lay back and pulled his blan?ket over him.
Faint?ly, from both

east and west, he could hear the war?ble of the thin?ny. He
checked in his pock?et for

the bul?lets Roland had giv?en him, and nod?ded with sat?is?
fac?tion when he felt them.

He reck?oned he could sleep with?out them tonight, but he
would want them again

to?mor?row. They weren't done tumpikin' just yet.

Su?san?nah leaned over him, kissed the tip of his nose. "Done for the day, sug?ar?"

"Yep," Ed?die said, and laced his hands to?geth?er be?hind his head. "It's not ev?ery

day that I hook a ride on the world's fastest train, de?stroy the world's smartest

com?put?er, and then dis?cov?er that ev?ery?one's been scragged by the flu. All be?fore

din?ner, too. Shit like that makes a man tired." Ed?die smiled and closed his eyes.

He was still smil?ing when sleep took him.

9

In his dream, they were all stand?ing on the com?er of Sec?ond Avenue and Forty-

sixth Street, look?ing over the short board fence and in?to the weedy va?cant lot

be?hind it. They were wear?ing their Mid-?World clothes—a mot ley com?bi?na?tion of

deer?skin and old shirts, most?ly held to?geth?er with spit and shoelaces—but none of

the pedes?tri?ans hur?ry?ing by on Sec?ond seemed to no?tice. No one no?ticed the bil?ly-

bum?bler in Jake's arms or the ar?tillery they were pack?ing, ei?ther.

Be?cause we're ghosts. Ed?die thought. We're ghosts and we don't rest easy.

On the fence there were hand?bills—one for the Sex Pis?tols (a re?union tour,

ac?cord?ing to the poster, and Ed?die thought that was pret?ty fun?ny— the Pis?tols was

one group that was nev?er go?ing to get back to?geth?er), one for a com?ic, Adam

Sandi?er, that Ed?die had nev?er heard of, one for a movie called The Craft, about

teenage witch?es. Be?yond that one, writ?ten in let?ters the dusky pink of sum?mer

ros?es, was this:

See the bear of fear?some size!

All the world's with?in his eyes.

time grows thin, the past's a rid?dle;

The tow?er awaits you in the mid?dle.

"There, " Jake said, point?ing. "The rose. See how it awaits us, there in the mid?dle

of the lot. "

“Yes, it’s very beau?tiful, ” Su?san?nah said. Then she point?ed to the sign stand?ing

near the rose and fac?ing Sec?ond Av?enue. Her voice and her eyes were trou?bled.

“But what about that? ”

Ac?cord?ing to the sign, two out?fits—Mills Con?struc?tion and Som?bra Re?al

Es?tate—were go?ing to com?bine on some?thing called Tur?tle Bay Con?do?mini?ums,

said con?dos to be erect?ed on this very spot. When? com ing soon was all the sign

had to say in that re?gard.

“I wouldn’t wor?ry about that, ” Jake said. “That sign was here be?fore. It’s prob?ably old as the hi—”

At that mo?ment the revving sound of an en?gine tore in?to the air. From be?yond the

fence, on the Forty-?sixth Street side of the lot, chugs of dirty brown ex?haust

as?cend?ed like bad-?news smoke sig?nals. Sud?den?ly the boards on that side burst

open, and a huge red bull?doz?er lunged through. Even the blade was red, al?though

the words slashed across its scoop—all hail the crim?son king—were writ?ten in a

yel?low as bright as pan?ic. Sit ting in the peak-?seat, his rot?ting face leer?ing at them

from above the con trols, was the man who had kid?napped Jake from the bridge

over the Riv?er Send—their old pal Gash?er. On the front of his cocked-?back hard-

hat, the words lamerk foundry stood out in black. Above them, a sin?gle star?ing eye

had been paint?ed.

Gash?er low?ered the ‘doz?er’s blade. It tore across the lot on a di?ag?onal, smash?ing

brick, pul?ver?iz?ing beer and so?da bot?tles to glit?ter?ing pow?der, strik?ing sparks from

the rocks. Di?rect?ly in its path, the rose nod?ded its del?icate head.

“Let’s see you ask some of yer sil?ly ques?tions now!” this un?wel?come ap?pari?tion

cried. “Ask all yer wants, my dear lit?tle culls, why not? Wery fond of rid?dles is yer

old pal Gash?er! Just so you un?der?stand that, no mat ter what

yer ask, I'm goin' ter

run that nasty thing over, mash it flat, aye, so I will! Then back over it I'll go! Root

and branch, my dear lit'tle culls! Aye, root and branch!"

Su?san?nah shrieked as the scar?let bull?doz?er blade bore down on the rose, and Ed?die

grabbed for the fence. He would vault over it, throw him self on the rose, try to

pro?tect it...

... ex?cept it was too late. And he knew it.

He looked back up at the cack?ling thing in the bull?doz?er's peak?-seat and saw that

Gash?er was gone. Now the man at the con?trols was En?gi?neer Bob, from Char?lie

the Choo?-Choo.

"Stop!" Ed?die screamed. "For Christ's sake, stop!"

"I can't, Ed?die. The world has moved on, and I can't stop. I must move on with it. "

And as the shad?ow of the 'doz?er fell over the rose, as the blade tore through one of

the posts hold?ing up the sign (Ed?die saw com?ing soon had changed to com?ing

now), he re?al?ized that the man at the con?trols wasn't En?gi?neer Bob, ei?ther.

It was Roland.

10

Ed?die sat up in the break?down lane of the turn?pike, gasp?ing breath he could see in

the air and with sweat al?ready chill?ing on his hot skin. He was sure he had

screamed, must have screamed, but Su?san?nah still slept be?side him with on?ly the

top of her head pok?ing out of the bedroll they shared, and Jake was snor?ing soft?ly

off to the left, one arm out of his own blan?kets and curled around Oy. The bum?bler

was al?so sleep?ing.

Roland wasn't. Roland sat calm?ly on the far side of the dead camp?fire, clean?ing his

guns by starlight and look?ing at Ed?die.

"Bad dreams." Not a ques?tion.

"Yeah."

"A vis?it from your broth?er?"

Ed?die shook his head.

"The Tow?er, then? The field of ros?es and the Tow?er?"

Roland's face reformed

impassive, but Edie could hear the subtle eagerness which always came into his

voice when the subject was the Dark Tower. Edie had once called the gunslinger

a Tower junkie, and Roland hadn't denied it.

"Not this time."

"What, then?"

Edie shivered. "Cold."

"Yes. Thank your gods there's no rain, at least. Autumn rain's an evil to be avoided

when ever one may. What was your dream?"

Still Edie hesitated. "You'd never betray us, would you, Roland?"

"No man can say that for sure, Edie, and I have already played the betrayer more

than once. To my shame. But ... I think those days are over. We are one, ka-tet. If I

betray any one of you—even Jake's furry friend, perhaps—I betray myself. Why

do you ask?"

"And you'd never betray your quest."

"Renounce the Tower? No, Edie. Not that, not ever. Tell me your dream."

Edie did, omitting nothing. When he had finished, Roland looked down at his

guns, frowning. They seemed to have reassembled themselves while Edie was

talking.

"So what does it mean, that I saw you driving that dozer at the end? That I still

don't trust you? That subconsciously—"

"Is thisology-of-the-psyche? The cabala I have heard you and Susanah speak of?"

"Yes, I guess it is."

"It's shit," Roland said dismissively. "Mudpies of the mind. Dreams either mean

nothing or everything—and when they mean everything, they almost always come

as messages from . . . well, from other levels of the Tower." He gazed at Edie

shrewdly. "And not all messages are sent by friends."

"Something or someone is fucking with my head? Is that what you mean?"

"I think it pos?si?ble. But you must watch me all the same. I bear watch?ing, as you well know."

"I trust you," Ed?die said, and the very awk?ward?ness with which he spoke lent his

words sin?cer?ity. Roland looked touched, al?most shak?en, and Ed?die won?dered how

he ev?er could have thought this man an emo?tion?less robot. Roland might be a lit?tle

short on imag?ina?tion, but he had feel?ings, all right.

"One thing about your dream con?cerns me very much, Ed?die."

"The bull?doz?er?"

"The ma?chine, yes. The threat to the rose."

"Jake saw the rose, Roland. It was fine."

Roland nod?ded. "In his when, the when of that par?tic?ular day, the rose was

thriv?ing. But that doesn't mean it will con?tin?ue to do so. If the con struc?tion the

sign spoke of comes . . . if the bull?doz?er comes ..."

"There are oth?er worlds than these," Ed?die said. "Re?mem?ber?"

"Some things may ex?ist on?ly in one. In one where, in one when." Roland lay down

and looked up at the stars. "We must pro?tect that rose," he said. "We must pro?tect

it at all costs."

"You think it's an?oth?er door, don't you? One that opens on the Dark Tow?er."

The gun?slinger looked at him from eyes that ran with starshine. "I think it may be

the Tow?er," he said. "And if it's de?stroyed—"

His eyes closed. He said no more.

Ed?die lay awake late.

11

The new day dawned clear and bright and cold. In the strong morn?ing sun?light, the

thing Ed?die had spot?ted the evening be?fore was more clear?ly vis?ible . . . but he still

couldn't tell what it was. An?oth?er rid?dle, and he was get?ting damned sick of them.

He stood squint?ing at it, shad?ing his eyes from the sun, with Su?sana?h on one side

of him and Jake on the oth?er. Roland was back by the camp?fire, pack?ing what he

called their gun?na, a word which seemed to mean all their

world?ly goods. He

ap?peared not to be con?cerned with the thing up ahead, or to know what it was.

How far away? Thir?ty miles? Fifty? The an?swer seemed to de?pend on how far

could you see in all this flat land, and Ed?die didn't know the an?swer. One thing he

felt quite sure of was that Jake had been right on at least two counts—it was some

kind of build?ing, and it sprawled across all four lanes of the high?way. It must; how

else could they see it? It would have been lost in the thin?ny ... wouldn't it?

Maybe it's stand?ing in one of those open patch?es—what Suze calls “the holes in

the clouds.” Or maybe the thin?ny ends be?fore we get that far. Or maybe it's a

god?dam hal?lu?ci?na?tion. In any case, you might as well put it out of your mind for

the time be?ing. Got a lit?tle more turn?pikin' to do.

Still, the build?ing held him. It looked like an airy Ara?bi?an Nights con fec?tion of

blue and gold . . . ex?cept Ed?die had an idea that the blue was stolen from the sky

and the gold from the new?ly risen sun.

”Roland, come here a sec?ond!”

At first he didn't think the gun?slinger would, but then Roland cinched a rawhide

lace on Su?san?nah's pack, rose, put his hands in the small of his back, stretched, and

walked over to them.

”Gods, one would think no one in this band has the wit to house?keep but me,”

Roland said.

”We'll pitch in,” Ed?die said, ”we al?ways do, don't we? But look at that thing first.”

Roland did, but on?ly with a quick glance, as if he did not even want to

ac?knowl?edge it.

”It's glass, isn't it?” Ed?die asked.

Roland took an?oth?er brief look. ”I wot,” he said, a phrase which seemed to mean

Reck?on so, part?ner.

”We've got lots of glass build?ings where I come from, but most of them are of?fice

build?ings. That thing up ahead looks more like some?thing from Dis?ney World. Do

you know what it is?“

”No.“

”Then why don’t you want to look at it?“ Su?san?nah asked.

Roland did take an?oth?er look at the dis?tant blaze of light on glass, but once again it

was quick—lit?tle more than a peek.

”Be?cause it’s trou?ble,“ Roland said, ”and it’s in our road. We’ll get there in time.

No need to live in trou?ble un?til trou?ble comes.“

”Will we get there to?day?“ Jake asked.

Roland shrugged, his face still closed. ”There’ll be wa?ter if God wills it,“ he said.

”Christ, you could have made a for?tune writ?ing for?tune cook?ies,“ Ed?die said. He

hoped for a smile, at least, but got none. Roland sim?ply walked back across the

road, dropped to one knee, shoul?dered his purse and his pack, and wait?ed for the

oth?ers. When they were ready, the pil grims re?sumed their walk east along

In?ter?state 70. The gun?slinger led, walk?ing with his head down and his eyes on the

toes of his boots.

12

Roland was qui?et all day, and as the build?ing ahead of them neared (trou?ble, and

in our road, he had said), Su?san?nah came to re?al?ize it wasn’t grumpi?ness they were

see?ing, or wor?ry about any?thing which lay any far?ther ahead of them than tonight.

It was the sto?ry he’d promised to tell them that Roland was think?ing about, and he

was a lot more than wor?ried.

By the time they stopped for their noon meal, they could clear?ly see the build?ing

ahead—a many?-?tur?ret?ed palace which ap?peared to be made en?tire?ly of re?flec?tive

glass. The thin?ny lay close around it, but the palace rose serene?ly above all, its

tur?rets try?ing for the sky. Mad?ly strange here in the flat coun?try?side of east?ern

Kansas, of course it was, but Su?san?nah thought it the most beau?ti?ful build?ing she

had ev?er seen in her life; even more beau?ti?ful than the Chrysler Build?ing, and that was go?ing some.

As they drew clos?er, she found it more and more dif?fi?cult to look else where.

Watch?ing the re?flec?tions of the puffy clouds sail?ing across the glass cas?tle's blue-

sky wains and walls was like watch?ing some splen?did il?lu?sion ... yet there was a

so?lid?ity to it, as well. An inar?gua?bil?ity. Some of that was prob?ably just the shad?ow

it threw—mi?rages did not, so far as she knew, cre?ate shad?ows—but not all. It just

was. She had no idea what such a fab?ulos?ity was do?ing out here in the land of

Stuck?ey's and Hard?ee's (not to men?tion Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers), but there it was.

She reck?oned that time would tell the rest.

13

They made camp in si?lence, watched Roland build the wood?en chim?ney that

would be their fire in si?lence, then sat be?fore it in si?lence, watch?ing the sun?set turn

the huge glass ed?ifice ahead of them in?to a cas?tle of fire. Its tow?ers and

bat?tle?ments glowed first a fierce red, then or?ange, then a gold which cooled

rapid?ly to ocher as Old Star ap?peared in the fir?ma?ment above them—

No, she thought in Delta's voice. Ain't dat one, girl. Not 'tall. That's the North Star.

Same one you seen back home, sit?tin on yo' dad?dy's lap.

But it was Old Star she want?ed, she dis?cov?ered; Old Star and Old Moth?er. She was

as?tound?ed to find her?self home?sick for Roland's world, and then won?dered why

she should be so sur?prised. It was a world, af?ter all, where no one had called her a

nig?ger bitch (at least not yet), a world where she had found some?one to love . . .

and made good friends as well. That last made her feel a lit?tle bit like cry?ing, and

she hugged Jake to her. He let him?self be hugged, smil?ing, his eyes half?-closed. At

some dis tance, un?pleas?ant but bear?able even with?out bul?

let earplugs, the thin?ny

war?bled its moan?ing song.

When the last traces of yel?low be?gan to fade from the cas?tle
up the road, Roland

left them to sit in the turn?pike trav?el lane and re?turned to his
fire. He cooked more

leaf?-wrapped deer?meat, and hand?ed the food around. They
ate in si?lence (Roland

ac?tu?al?ly ate al?most noth?ing, Su?san?nah ob served). By the
time they were fin?ished,

they could see the Milky Way scat?tered across the walls of the
cas?tle ahead of

them, fierce points of re flec?tion that burned like fire in still
wa?ter.

Ed?die was the one who fi?nal?ly broke the si?lence. “You don’t
have to,” he said.

“You’re ex?cused. Or ab?solved. Or what?ev?er the hell it is you
need to take that look

off your face.”

Roland ig?nored him. He drank, tilt?ing the wa?ter?skin up on
his el?bow like some

hick drink?ing moon?shine from a jug, head back, eyes on the
stars. The last

mouth?ful he spat to the road?side.

“Life for your crop,” Ed?die said. He did not smile.

Roland said noth?ing, but his cheek went pale, as if he had seen
a ghost. Or heard

one.

14

The gun?slinger turned to Jake, who looked back at him se?ri?
ously. “I went through

the tri?al of man?hood at the age of four?teen, the youngest of
my ka?-tel—of my

class, you would say—and per?haps the youngest ev?er. I told
you some of that,

Jake. Do you re?mem?ber?”

You told all of us some of that, Su?san?nah thought, but kept
her mouth shut, and

warned Ed?die with her eyes to do the same. Roland hadn’t been
him?self dur?ing that

telling; with Jake both dead and alive with?in his head, the man
had been fight?ing

mad?ness.

“You mean when we were chas?ing Wal?ter,” Jake said. “Af?ter
the way sta?tion but

be?fore I... I took my fall."

"That's right."

"I re?mem?ber a lit?tle, but that's all. The way you re?mem?ber the stuff you dream about."

Roland nod?ded. "Lis?ten, then. I would tell you more this time, Jake, be?cause you are old?er. I sup?pose we all are."

Su?san?nah was no less fas?ci?nat?ed with the sto?ry the sec?ond time: how the boy

Roland had chanced to dis?cov?er Marten, his fa?ther's ad?vi?sor (his fa?ther's wiz?ard) in

his moth?er's apart?ment. On?ly none of it had been by chance, of course; the boy

would have passed her door with no more than a glance had Marten not opened it

and in?vit?ed him in. Marten had told Roland that his moth?er want?ed to see him, but

one look at her rue?ful smile and down?cast eyes as she sat in her low-?back chair

told the boy he was the last per?son in the world Gabrielle Deschain want?ed to see

just then.

The flush on her cheek and the love-?bite on the side of her neck told him

ev?ery?thing else.

Thus had he been goad?ed by Marten in?to an ear?ly tri?al of man?hood, and by

em?ploy?ing a weapon his teach?er had not ex?pect?ed—his hawk, David—Roland had

de?feat?ed Cort, tak?en his stick ... and made the en?emy of his life in Marten

Broad?cloak.

Beat?en bad?ly, face swelling in?to some?thing that looked like a child's gob?lin mask,

slip?ping to?ward a co?ma, Cort had fought back un?con?sciousness long enough to

of?fer his newest ap?pren?tice gun?slinger coun?sel: stay away from Marten yet awhile,

Cort had said.

"He told me to let the sto?ry of our bat?tle grow in?to a leg?end," the gun slinger told

Ed?die, Su?san?nah, and Jake. "To wait un?til my shad?ow had grown hair on its face

and haunt?ed Marten in his dreams."

"Did you take his advice?" Su?san?nah asked.

"I nev?er got a chance," Roland said. His face cracked in a rue?ful, painful smile. "I

meant to think about it, and se?ri?ous?ly, but be?fore I even got start?ed on my

think?ing, things ... changed."

"They have a way of do?ing that, don't they?" Ed?die said. "My good ness, yes."

"I buried my hawk, the first weapon I ev?er wield?ed, and per?haps the finest.

Then—and this part I'm sure I didn't tell you be?fore, Jake—I went in?to the low?er

town. That sum?mer's heat broke in storms full of thun?der and hail, and in a room

above one of the broth?els where Cort had been wont to rois?ter, I lay with a wom?an

for the first time."

He poked a stick thought?ful?ly in?to the fire, seemed to be?come aware of the

un?con?scious sym?bol?ism in what he was do?ing, and threw it away with a lop?sid?ed

grin. It land?ed, smol?der?ing, near the tire of an aban?doned Dodge As?pen and went

out.

"It was good. The sex was good. Not the great thing I and my friends had thought

about and whis?pered about and won?dered about, of course—"

"I think store-?bought pussy tends to be over?rat?ed by the young, sug?ar," Su?san?nah

said.

"I fell asleep lis?ten?ing to the sots down?stairs singing along with the pi?ano and to

the sound of hail on the win?dow. I awoke the next morn?ing in ... well. . . let's just

say I awoke in a way I nev?er would have ex?pect?ed to awake in such a place."

Jake fed fresh fu?el to the fire. It flared up, paint?ing high?lights on Roland's cheeks,

brush?ing cres?cents of shad?ow be?neath his brows and be low his low?er lip. And as

he talked, Su?san?nah found she could al?most see what had hap?pened on that long-

ago morn?ing that must have smelled of wet cob?ble?stones and rain-?sweet?ened

sum?mer air; what had hap?pened in a whore's crib above a

drink?ing-?dive in the

low?er town of Gilead, Barony seat of New Canaan, one small mote of land lo?cat?ed

in the west?ern re gions of Mid-?World.

One boy, still aching from his bat?tle of the day be?fore and new?ly edu cat?ed in the

mys?ter?ies of sex. One boy, now look?ing twelve in?stead of four?teen, his lash?es

dust?ing down thick up?on his cheeks, the lids shut?ter ing those ex?traor?di?nary blue

eyes; one boy with his hand loose?ly cup?ping a whore's breast, his hawk-?scarred

wrist ly?ing tanned up?on the counter pane. One boy in the fi?nal in?stants of his life's

last good sleep, one boy who will short?ly be in mo?tion, who will be falling as a

dis?lodged peb?ble falls on a steep and bro?ken slope of scree; a falling peb?ble that

strikes an?oth?er, and an?oth?er, and an?oth?er, those peb?bles strik?ing yet more, un?til the

whole slope is in mo?tion and the earth shakes with the sound of the land?slide.

One boy, one peb?ble on a slope loose and ready to slide.

A knot ex?plod?ed in the fire. Some?where in this dream of Kansas, an an?imal

yipped. Su?san?nah watched sparks swirl up past Roland's in?cre?di bly an?cient face

and saw in that face the sleep?ing boy of a sum?mer's mom, ly?ing in a bawd's bed.

And then she saw the door crash open, end ing Gilead's last trou?bled dream.

15

The man who strode in, cross?ing the room to the bed be?fore Roland could open his

eyes (and be?fore the wom?an be?side him had even be?gun to reg?is?ter the sound), was

tall, slim, dressed in fad?ed jeans and a dusty shirt of blue cham?bray. On his head

was a dark gray hat with a snake?skin band. Ly?ing low on his hips were two old

leather hol?sters. Jut?ting from them were the san?dal?wood grips of the pis?tols the

boy would some?day bear to lands of which this scowl?ing man with the fu?ri?ous

blue eyes would nev?er dream.

Roland was in mo?tion even be?fore he was able to un?seal his eyes, rolling to the

left, grop?ing be?neath the bed for what was there. He was fast, so fast it was scary,

but—and Su?san?nah saw this, too, saw it clear?ly— the man in the fad?ed jeans was

faster yet. He grabbed the boy’s shoul?der and yanked, turn?ing him naked out of

bed and on?to the floor. The boy sprawled there, reach?ing again for what was

be?neath the bed, light?ning-?quick. The man in the jeans stamped down on his

fin?gers be?fore they could grasp.

“Bas?tard!” the boy gasped. “Oh, you bas—”

But now his eyes were open, he looked up, and saw that the in?vad?ing bas?tard was

his fa?ther.

The whore was sit?ting up now, her eyes puffy, her face slack and petu?lant. “Here!”

she cried. “Here, here! You can’t just be a-?comin in like that, so you can’t! Why, if

I was to raise my voice—”

Ig?nor?ing her, the man reached be?neath the bed and dragged out two gun?belts. Near

the end of each was a bol?stered re?volver. They were large, and amaz?ing in this

large?ly gun?less world, but they were not so large as those worn by Roland’s fa?ther,

and the grips were erod?ed met?al plates rather than in?laid wood. When the whore

saw the guns on the in?vad?er’s hips and the ones in his hands—the ones her young

cus?tomer of the night be?fore had been wear?ing un?til she had tak?en him up?stairs

and di?vest?ed him of all weapons save for the one with which she was most

fa?mil?iar— the ex?pres?sion of sleepy petu?lance left her face. What re?placed it was

the fox?like look of a born sur?vivor. She was up, out of bed, across the floor, and

out the door be?fore her bare bum had more than a brief mo?ment to twin?kle in the

morn?ing sun.

Nei?ther the fa?ther stand?ing by the bed nor the son ly?ing naked up?on the floor at his

feet so much as looked at her. The man in the jeans held out the gun?belts which

Roland had tak?en from the fuzer be?neath the ap pren?tices' bar?racks on the pre?vi?ous

af?ter?noon, us?ing Cort's key to open the ar?se?nal door. The man shook the belts

un?der Roland's very nose, as one might hold a torn gar?ment be?neath the nose of a

feck?less pup?py that has chewed. He shook them so hard that one of the guns

tum?bled free. De?spite his stu?pe?fac?tion, Roland caught it in midair.

"I thought you were in the west," Roland said. "In Cres?sia. Af?ter Far-?son and his—"

Roland's fa?ther slapped him hard enough to send the boy tum?bling across the room

and in?to a cor?ner with blood pour?ing from one com?er of his mouth. Roland's first,

ap?palling in?stinct was to raise the gun he still held.

Steven De?schain looked at him, hands on hips, read?ing this thought even be?fore it

was ful?ly formed. His lips pulled back in a sin?gu?lar?ly mirth less grin, one that

showed all of his teeth and most of his gums.

"Shoot me if you will. Why not? Make this abor?tion com?plete. Ah, gods, I'd

wel?come it!"

Roland laid the gun on the floor and pushed it away, us?ing the back of his hand to

do it. All at once he want?ed his fin?gers nowhere near the trig ger of a gun. They

were no longer ful?ly un?der his con?trol, those fin?gers. He had dis?cov?ered that

yes?ter?day, right around the time he had bro?ken Cort's nose.

"Fa?ther, I was test?ed yes?ter?day. I took Cort's stick. I won. I'm a man."

"You're a fool," his fa?ther said. His grin was gone now; he looked hag?gard and

old. He sat down heav?ily on the whore's bed, looked at the gun?belts he still held,

and dropped them be?tween his feet. "You're a four?teen-?year-?old fool, and that's the

worst, most des?per?ate kind." He looked up, an?gry all over again, but Roland didn't

mind; anger was bet?ter than that look of weariness. That look of age. "I've known

since you told that you were no genius, but I never believed until yestereve that

you were an idiot. To let him drive you like a cow in a chute! Gods! You have

forgot?ten the face of your father! Say it!"

And that sparked the boy's own anger. Everything he had done the day before he

had done with his father's face firmly fixed in his mind.

"That's not true!" he shouted from where he now sat with his bare butt on the

splintery boards of the whore's crib and his back against the wall, the sun shining

through the window and touching the fuzz on his fair, unscarred cheek.

"It is true, you whelp! Foolish whelp! Say your atonement or I'll strip the hide

from your very—"

"They were together!" he burst out. "Your wife and your minister— your

magician! I saw the mark of his mouth on her neck! On my mother's neck!" He

reached for the gun and picked it up, but even in his shame and fury was still

careful not to let his fingers stray near the trigger; he held the apprentice's revolver

only by the plain, undecorated metal of its barrel. "Today I end his treacherous,

seducer's life with this, and if you aren't man enough to help me, at least you can

stand aside and let me—"

One of the revolvers on Steven's hip was out of its holster and in his hand before

Roland's eyes saw any move. There was a single shot, deafening as thunder in the

little room; it was a full minute before Roland was able to hear the babble of

questions and commotion from below. The 'prentice-gun, meanwhile, was long

gone, blown out of his hand and leaving nothing behind but a kind of buzzing

tingle. It flew out the window, down and gone, its grip smashed ruin of metal

and its short turn in the gun-slinger's long tale at an end.

Roland looked at his father, shocked and amazed. Steven looked back, saying

nothing for a long time. But now he wore the face Roland remembered from

earliest childhood: calm and sure. The weariness and the look of half-distracted

fury had passed away like last night's thunderstorms.

At last his father spoke. "I was wrong in what I said, and I apologize. You did not

forget my face, Roland. But still you were foolish—you allowed yourself to be

driven by one fearer than you will ever be in your life. It's only by the grace of

the gods and the working of karma that you have not been sent west, one more true

gunslinger out of Marten's road . . . out of John Farson's road . . . and out of the

road which leads to the creature that rules them." He stood and held out his arms.

"If I had lost you, Roland, I should have died."

Roland got to his feet and went naked to his father, who embraced him fiercely.

When Steven Deschain kissed him first on one cheek and then the other, Roland

began to weep. Then, in Roland's ear, Steven Deschain whispered six words.

16

"What?" Susanah asked. "What six words?"

" 'I have known for two years,' " Roland said. "That was what he whispered."

"Holy Christ," Edie said.

"He told me I couldn't go back to the palace. If I did, I'd be dead by nightfall. He

said, 'You have been born to your destiny in spite of all Marten could do; yet he

has sworn to kill you before you can grow to be a problem to him. It seems that,

winner in the test or no, you must leave Gilead anyway. For only awhile, though,

and you'll go east instead of west. I'd not send you alone, either, or without a

purpose.' Then, almost as an afterthought, he added: 'Or with a pair of sorcery

'prentice revolvers.' "

"What purpose?" Jake asked. He had clearly been captivated

ed by the sto?ry; his eyes

shone near?ly as bright as Oy's. "And which friends?"

"These things you must now hear," Roland said, "and how you judge me will

come in time."

He fetched a sigh—the deep sigh of a man who con?tem?plates some ar?du?ous piece

of work—and then tossed fresh wood on the fire. As the flames flared up, driv?ing

the shad?ows back a lit?tle way, he be?gan to talk. All that queer?ly long night he

talked, not fin?ish?ing the sto?ry of Su?san Del?ga?do un?til the sun was ris?ing in the east

and paint?ing the glass cas?tle yon der with all the bright hues of a fresh day, and a

strange green cast of light which was its own true col?or.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART TWO

SU?SAN

CHAP?TER I

.....

BE?NEATH THE

KISS?ING MOON

1

A per?fect disc of sil?ver—the Kiss?ing Moon, as it was called in Full Earth—hung

above the ragged hill five miles east of Ham?bry and ten miles south of Eye?bolt

Canyon. Be?low the hill the late sum?mer heat still held, suf?fo?cat?ing even two hours

af?ter sun?down, but atop the Coos, it was as if Reap had al?ready come, with its

strong breezes and frost-?pinched air. For the wom?an who lived here with no

com?pa?ny but a snake and one old mu?tie cat, it was to be a long night.

Nev?er mind, though; nev?er mind, my dear. Busy hands are hap?py hands. So they are.

She wait?ed un?til the hoof?beats of her vis?itors' hors?es had fad?ed, sit ting qui?et?ly by

the win?dow in the hut's large room (there was on?ly one oth?er, a bed?room lit?tle

big?ger than a clos?et). Musty, the six-?legged cat, was on her shoul?der. Her lap was

full of moon?light.

Three hors?es, bear?ing away three men. The Big Cof?fin Hunters, they called

them?selves.

She snort?ed. Men were fun?ny, aye, so they were, and the most amus ing thing

about them was how lit?tle they knew it. Men, with their swag ger?ing, belt-?hitch?ing

names for them?selves. Men, so proud of their mus?cles, their drink?ing ca?pac?ities,

their eat?ing ca?pac?ities; so ev?er?last?ing?ly proud of their pricks. Yes, even in these

times, when a good many of them could shoot noth?ing but strange, bent seed that

pro?duced chil?dren fit on?ly to be drowned in the near?est

well. Ah, but it was nev?er

their fault, was it, dear? No, al?ways it was the wom?an—her womb, her fault. Men

were such cow ards. Such grin?ning cow?ards. These three had been no dif?fer?ent

from the gen?er?al run. The old one with the limp might bear watch?ing—aye, so he

might, a clear and over?ly cu?ri?ous pair of eyes had looked out at her from his

head—but she saw noth?ing in them she could not deal with, came it to that.

Men! She could not un?der?stand why so many wom?en feared them. Hadn't the gods

made them with the most vul?ner?able part of their guts hang?ing right out of their

bod?ies, like a mis?placed bit of bow?el? Kick them there and they curled up like

snails. Ca?ress them there and their brains melt?ed. Any?one who doubt?ed that

sec?ond bit of wis?dom need on?ly look at her night's sec?ond bit of busi?ness, the one

which still lay ahead. Thorin! May?or of Ham?bry! Chief Guard o' Barony! No fool

like an old fool!

Yet none of these thoughts had any re?al pow?er over her or any re?al mal?ice to them,

at least not now; the three men who called them?selves the Big Cof?fin Hunters had

brought her a mar?vel, and she would look at it; aye, fill up her eyes with it, so she

would.

The gimp, Jonas, had in?sist?ed she put it away—he had been told she had a place

for such things, not that he want?ed to see it him?self, not any of her se?cret places,

gods for?bid (at this sal?ly De?pape and Reynolds had laughed like trolls)—and so

she had, but the hoof?beats of their hors?es had been swal?lowed by the wind now,

and she would do as she liked. The girl whose tits had stolen what lit?tle there was

of Hart Thorin's mind would not be here for an?oth?er hour, at least (the old wom?an

had in?sist?ed that the girl walk from town, cit?ing the pu?rifi?ca?tion val?ue of such a

moon?lit heel-?and-?toe, ac?tu?al?ly just want?ing to put a safe bumper of time be?tween

her two ap?point?ments), and dur?ing that hour she would do as she liked.

“Oh, it’s beau?ti?ful, I’m sure ’tis,” she whis?pered, and did she feel a cer?tain heat in

that place where her an?cient bowlegs came to?geth?er? A cer?tain mois?ture in the dry

creek which hid there? Gods!

“Aye, even through the box where they hid it I felt its glam. So beau ti?ful, Musty,

like you.” She took the cat from her shoul?der and held it in front of her eyes. The

old torn purred and stretched out its pug of a face to?ward hers. She kissed its nose.

The cat closed its milky gray-?green eyes in ec?sta?sy. “So beau?ti?ful, like you—so

y’are, so y’are! Hee!”

She put the cat down. It walked slow?ly to?ward the hearth, where a late fire lazed,

desul?to?ri?ly eat?ing at a sin?gle log. Musty’s tail, split at the tip so it looked like the

forked tail of a dev?il in an old draw?ing, switched back and forth in the room’s dim

or?ange air. Its ex?tra legs, dan?gling from its sides, twitched dream?ily. The shad?ow

which trailed across the floor and grew up the wall was a hor?ror: a thing that

looked like a cat crossed with a spi?der.

The old wom?an rose and went in?to her sleep?ing clos?et, where she had tak?en the

thing Jonas had giv?en her.

“Lose that and you’ll lose your head,” he’d said.

“Nev?er fear me, my good friend,” she’d replied, di?rect?ing a cring?ing, servile smile

back over her shoul?der, all the while think?ing: Men! Fool?ish strut?ting crea?tures

they were!

Now she went to the foot of her bed, knelt, and passed one hand over the earth

floor there. Lines ap?peared in the sour dirt as she did. They formed a square. She

pushed her fin?gers in?to one of these lines; it gave be fore her touch. She lift?ed the

hid?den pan?el (hid?den in such a way that no one with?out the

touch would ever be

able to uncover it), revealing a compartment perhaps a foot square and two feet

deep. Within it was an ironwood box. Curled atop the box was a slim green snake.

When she touched its back, its head came up. Its mouth yawned in a silent hiss,

displaying four pairs of fangs—two on top, two on the bottom.

She took the snake up, crooning to it. As she brought its flat face close to her own,

its mouth yawned wider and its hissing became audible. She opened her own

mouth; from between her wrinkled gray lips she poked the yellowish, bad-

smelling mat of her tongue. Two drops of poison— enough to kill an antineer-

partly, if mixed in the punch—fell on it. She swallowed, feeling her mouth and

throat and chest burn, as if with strong liquor. For a moment the room swam out of

focus, and she could hear voices murmuring in the stenchy air of the hut—the

voices of those she called “the unseen friends.” Her eyes ran sticky water down the

trenches time had drawn in her cheeks. Then she blew out a breath and the room

steadied. The voices faded.

She kissed Ermot between his lidless eyes (time of the Kissing Moon, all right, she

thought) and then set him aside. The snake slipped beneath her bed, curled itself in

a circle, and watched as she passed her palms over the top of the ironwood box.

She could feel the muscles in her upper arms quivering, and that heat in her loins

was more pronounced. Years it had been since she had felt the call of her sex, but

she felt it now, so she did, and it was not the doing of the Kissing Moon, or not

much.

The box was locked and Jonas had given her no key, but that was nothing to her,

who had lived long and studied much and trafficked with creatures that most men,

for all their bold talk and strut?ing ways, would run from as if on fire had they

caught even the small?est glimpse of them. She stretched one hand to?ward the lock,

on which was in?laid the shape of an eye and a mot?to in the High Speech (I see

who opens me), and then with?drew it. All at once she could smell what her nose

no longer no?ticed un?der or?di?nary cir?cum?stances: must and dust and a dirty

mat?tress and the crumbs of food that had been con?sumed in bed; the min?gled

stench of ash?es and an?cient in?cense; the odor of an old wom?an with wet eyes and

(or?di?nar?ily, at least) a dry pussy. She would not open this box and look at the

won?der it con?tained in here; she would go out?side, where the air was clean and the

on?ly smells were sage and mesquite.

She would look by the light of the Kiss?ing Moon.

Rhea of Coos Hill pulled the box from its hole with a grunt, rose to her feet with

an?oth?er grunt (this one from her nether re?gions), tucked the box un?der her arm,

and left the room.

2

The hut was far enough be?low the brow of the hill to block off the bit?ter est gusts

of the win?ter wind which blew al?most con?stant?ly in these high lands from Reap?ing

un?til the end of Wide Earth. A path led to the hill's high?est van?tage; be?neath the

full moon it was a ditch of sil?ver. The old wom?an toiled up it, puff?ing, her white

hair stand?ing out around her head in dirty clumps, her old dugs sway?ing from side

to side un?der her black dress. The cat fol?lowed in her shad?ow, still giv?ing off its

rusty purr like a stink.

At the top of the hill, the wind lift?ed her hair away from her rav?aged face and

brought her the moan?ing whis?per of the thin?ny which had eat?en its way in?to the far

end of Eye?bolt Canyon. It was a sound few cared for, she knew, but she her?self

loved it; to Rhea of the Coos, it sound?ed like a lul?la?by. Over?
head rode the moon,

the shad?ows on its bright skin sketch ing the faces of lovers
kiss?ing ... if you

be?lieved the or?di?nary fools be low, that was. The or?di?nary
fools be?low saw a

dif?fer?ent face or set of faces in each full moon, but the hag
knew there was on?ly

one—the face of the De?mon. The face of death.

She her?self, how?ev?er, had nev?er felt more alive.

“Oh, my beau?ty,” she whis?pered, and touched the lock with
her gnarled fin?gers. A

faint glim?mer of red light showed be?tween her bunched
knuck?les, and there was a

click. Breath?ing hard, like a wom?an who has run a race, she
put the box down and

opened it.

Rose?col?ored light, dim?mer than that thrown by the Kiss?ing
Moon but in?finite?ly

more beau?ti?ful, spilled out. It touched the ru?ined face hang?
ing above the box, and

for a mo?ment made it the face of a young girl again.

Musty sniffed, head stretched for?ward, ears laid back, old eyes
rimmed with that

rose light. Rhea was in?stant?ly jeal?ous.

“Get away, fool?ish, ’tis not for the likes of you!”

She swat?ted the cat. Musty shied back, hiss?ing like a ket?tle,
and stalked in

dud?geon to the hum?mock which marked the very tip of Coos
Hill. There he sat,

af?fect?ing dis?dain and lick?ing one paw as the wind combed
cease?less?ly through his

fur.

With?in the box, peep?ing out of a vel?vet draw?string bag, was
a glass globe. It was

filled with that rosy light; it flowed in gen?tle puls?es, like the
beat of a sat?is?fied

heart. \

“Oh, my love?ly one,” she mur?mured, lift?ing it out. She held it
up be fore her; let its

puls?ing ra?di?ance run down her wrin?kled face like rain. “Oh,
ye live, so ye do!”

Sud?den?ly the col?or with?in the globe dark?ened to?ward
scar?let. She felt it thrum in

her hands like an im?mense?ly pow?er?ful mo?tor, and again

she felt that amaz?ing

wet?ness be?tween her legs, that tidal tug she be?lieved had been left be?hind long

ago.

Then the thrum?ming died, and the light in the globe seemed to furl up like petals.

Where it had been there was now a pink?ish gloom . . . and three rid?ers com?ing out

of it. At first she thought it was the men who had brought her the globe—Jonas

and the oth?ers. But no, these were younger, even younger than De?pape, who was

about twen?ty-?five. The one on the left of the trio ap?peared to have a bird's skull

mount?ed on the pom?mel of his sad?dle—strange but true.

Then that one and the one on the right were gone, dark?ened away some?how by the

pow?er of the glass, leav?ing on?ly the one in the mid?dle. She took in the jeans and

boots he wore, the flat-?brimmed hat that hid the up?per half of his face, the easy

way he sat his horse, and her first alarmed thought was Gun?slinger! Come east

from the In?ner Ba?ronies, aye, per haps from Gilead it?self! But she did not have to

see the up?per half of the rid?er's face to know he was lit?tle more than a child, and

there were no guns on his hips. Yet she didn't think the youth came un?armed. If

on?ly she could see a lit?tle bet?ter . . .

She brought the glass al?most to the tip of her nose and whis?pered, "Clos?er, lovie!

Clos?er still!"

She didn't know what to ex?pect—noth?ing at all seemed most like?ly—but with?in

the dark cir?cle of the glass, the fig?ure did come clos?er. Swum clos?er, al?most, like a

horse and rid?er un?der?wa?ter, and she saw there was a quiver of ar?rows on his back.

Be?fore him, on the pom?mel of his sad?dle, was not a skull but a short?bow. And to

the right side of the sad?dle, where a gun?slinger might have car?ried a ri?fle in a

scab?bard, there was the feath?er-?fluffed shaft of a lance. He was not one of the Old

Peo?ple, his face had none of that look ... yet she did not think he was of the Out?er

Arc, ei?ther.

“But who are ye, cul?ly?” she breathed. “And how shall I know ye? Ye’ve got yer

hat pulled down so far I can’t see your God-?pound?ing eyes, so ye do! By yer horse,

may?hap ... or p’raps by yer ... get away, Musty! Why do yer trou?ble me so? Ar?rrr!”

The cat had come back from its look?out point and was twin?ing back and forth

be?tween her swollen old an?kles, waow?ing up at her in a voice even more rusty

than its purr. When the old wom?an kicked out at him, Musty dodged ag?ile?ly away

. . . then im?me?di?ate?ly came back and start?ed in again, look?ing up at her with

moon?struck eyes and mak?ing those soft yowls.

Rhea kicked out at it again, this one just as in?ef?fec?tu?al as the first one, then looked

in?to the glass once more. The horse and its in?ter?est?ing young rid?er were gone. The

rose light was gone, as well. It was now just a dead glass ball she held, its on?ly

light a re?flec?tion bor?rowed from the moon.

The wind gust?ed, press?ing her dress against the ru?ina?tion that was her body.

Musty, un?daunt?ed by the fee?ble kicks of his mis?tress, dart?ed for ward and be?gan to

twine about her an?kles again, cry?ing up at her the whole time.

“There, do ye see what you’ve done, ye nasty bag of fleas and dis ease? The light’s

gone out of it, gone out just when I—”

Then she heard a sound from the cart track which led up to her hut, and

un?der?stood why Musty had been act?ing out. It was singing she heard. It was the

girl she heard. The girl was ear?ly.

Gri?mac?ing hor?ri?bly—she loathed be?ing caught by sur?prise, and the lit?tle miss

down there would pay for do?ing it—she bent and put the glass back in its box. The

in?side was lined with padded silk, and the ball fit as neat?ly as the break?fast egg in

His Lord?ship’s cup. And still from down the hill (the cursed

wind was wrong or

she would have heard it soon(er), the sound of the girl singing,
now closer than

ever:

“Love, o love, o care?less love.

Can’t you see what care?less love has done?”

“I’ll give’ee care?less love, ye vir?gin bitch,” the old woman
said. She could smell

the sour reek of sweat from under her arms, but that other
mois?ture had dried up

again. “I’ll give ye pay?day for walk?ing in ear?ly on old Rhea,
so I will!”

She passed her fin?gers over the lock on the front of the box, but
it wouldn’t fas?ten.

She sup?posed she had been overea?ger to have it open, and had
bro?ken some?thing

inside it when she used the touch. The eye and the mot?to
seemed to mock her: i

see who opens me. It could be put right, and in a jiffy, but right
now even a jiffy

was more than she had.

“Pes?ter?ing cunt!” She whined, lift?ing her head briefly to?
ward the ap?proach?ing

voice (al?most here now, by the gods, and forty-?five min?utes
be fore her time!).

Then she closed the lid of the box. It gave her a pang to do it,
be?cause the glass

was com?ing to life again, fill?ing with that rosy glow, but there
was no time for

look?ing or dream?ing now. Lat?er, per?haps, af?ter the ob?ject
of Thorin’s un?seem?ly

late-?life prick?ish?ness had gone.

And you must re?strain your?self from do?ing any?thing too aw?
ful to the girl, she

cau?tioned her?self. Re?mem?ber she’s here be?cause of him,
and at least ain’t one of

those green girls with a bun in the oven and a boyfriend act?ing
re?luc?tant about the

cries o’ mar?riage. It’s Thorin’s do?ing, this one’s what he thinks
about af?ter his

ug?ly old crow of a wife is asleep and he takes him?self in his
hand and com?mences

the evening milk?ing; it’s Thorin’s do?ing, he has the old law on
his side, and he has

pow?er. Fur?ther more, what’s in that box is his man’s busi?

ness, and if Jonas found

out ye looked at it... that ye used it. ..

Aye, but no fear of that. And in the mean?time, pos?ses?sion
were nine-?tenths of the

law, were it not?

She hoist?ed the box un?der one arm, hoist?ed her skirts with
her free hand, and ran

back along the path to the hut. She could still run when she had
to, aye, though

few there were who'd be?lieve it.

Musty ran at her heels, bound?ing along with his cloven tail
held high and his ex?tra

legs flop?ping up and down in the moon?light.

CHAP?TER II

prov?ing hon?esty

1

Rhea dart?ed in?to her hut, crossed in front of the gut?ter?ing
fire, then stood in the

door?way to her tiny bed?room, swip?ing a hand through her
hair in a dis?tract?ed

ges?ture. The bitch hadn't seen her out?side the hut—she sure?
ly would have stopped

cat?er?waul?ing, or at least fal?tered in it if she had— and that
was good, but the

cursed hidey-?hole had sealed it?self up again, and that was bad.
There was no time

to open it again, ei?ther. Rhea hur?ried to the bed, knelt, and
pushed the box far back

in?to the shad?ows be?neath.

Ay, that would do; un?til Susy Green?gown was gone, it would
do very well.

Smil?ing on the right side of her mouth (the left was most?ly
frozen), Rhea got up,

brushed her dress, and went to meet her sec?ond ap?point?ment
of the night.

2

Be?hind her, the un?locked lid of the box clicked open. It came
up less than an inch,

but that was enough to al?low a sliv?er of puls?ing rose-?col?
ored light to shine out.

3

Su?sana Del?ga?do stopped about forty yards from the witch's
hut, the sweat chill?ing

on her arms and the nape of her neck. Had she just spied an old
wom?an (sure?ly the

one she had come to see) dart down that last bit of path leading from the top of the hill? She thought she had.

Don't stop singing—when an old lady hurries like that, she doesn't want to be

seen. If you stop singing, she'll likely know she was.

For a moment Susan thought she'd stop anyway—that her memory would close up

like a startled hand and deny her another verse of the old song which she had been

singing since youngest childhood. But the next verse came to her, and she

continued on (with feet as well as voice):

“Once my cares were far away,

Yes, once my cares were far away,

Now my love has gone from me

And misery is in my heart to stay.”

A bad song for a night such as this, maybe, but her heart went its own way

without much interest in what her head thought or wanted; all ways had[^] She was

frightened to be out by moonlight, when werewolves were said to walk, she was

frightened of her errand, and she was frightened by what that errand portended.

Yet when she had gained the Great Road out of Hamby and her heart had

demand[^]ed she run, she had run— under the light of the Kiss[^]ing Moon and with

her skirt held above her knees she had galloped like a pony, with her shadow

galloping right beside her. For a mile or more she had run, until every muscle in

her body tingled and the air she pulled down her throat tasted like some sweet

heat[^]ed liquid. And when she reached the upland track leading to this high sinister,

she had sung. Because her heart demand[^]ed it. And, she supposed, it really hadn't

been such a bad idea; if nothing else, it had kept the worst of her migraines away.

Singing was good for that much, anyway.

Now she walked to the end of the path, singing the chorus of “Careless Love.” As

she stepped into the scant light which fell through the open

door and on?to the

stoop, a harsh rain?crow voice spoke from the shad?ows: “Stop yer howl?ing,

mis?sy—it catch?es in my brains like a fish?hook!”

Su?san, who had been told all her life that she had a fair singing voice, a gift from

her gram?ma, no doubt, fell silent at once, abashed. She stood on the stoop with her

hands clasped in front of her apron. Be?neath the apron she wore her sec?ond-?best

dress (she on?ly had two). Be?neath it, her heart was thump?ing very hard.

A cat—a hideous thing with two ex?tra legs stick?ing out of its sides like toast?ing

forks—came in?to the door?way first. It looked up at her, seemed to mea?sure her,

then screwed its face up in a look that was eeri?ly hu?man: con?tempt. It hissed at

her, then flashed away in?to the night.

Well, good evening to you, too, Su?san thought.

The old wom?an she had been sent to see stepped in?to the door?way.

She looked Su?san up and down with that same ex?pres?sion of flat-?eyed con?tempt,

then stood back. “Come in. And mind ye clap the door tight. The wind has a way

of blowin it open, as ye see!”

Su?san stepped in?side. She didn’t want to close her?self in?to this bad-?smelling room

with the old wom?an, but when there was no choice, hesi?ta tion was ev?er a fault. So

her fa?ther had said, whether the mat?ter un?der dis?cus?sion was sums and

sub?trac?tions or how to deal with boys at barn-?dances when their hands be?came

over?ly ad?ven?tur?ous. She pulled the door firm?ly to, and heard it latch.

“And here y’are,” the old wom?an said, and of?fered a grotesque smile of wel?come.

It was a smile guar?an?teed to make even a brave girl think of sto?ries told in the

nurs?ery—Win?ter’s tales of old wom?en with snag?gle teeth and bub?bling caul?drons

full of toad-?green liq?uid. There was no caul dron over the fire in this room (nor

was the fire it?self much of a shake, in Su?san's opin?ion), but the girl guessed there

had been, be?times, and things in it of which it might be bet?ter not to think. That

this wom?an was a re?al witch and not just an old la?dy pos?ing as one was some?thing

Su?san had felt sure of from the mo?ment she had seen Rhea dart?ing back in?side her

hut with the mal?formed cat at her heels. It was some?thing you could al?most smell,

like the reeky aro?ma ris?ing off the hag's skin.

"Yes," she said, smil?ing. She tried to make it a good one, bright and un?afraid.

"Here I am."

"And it's ear?ly y'are, my lit?tle sweet?ing. Ear?ly y'are! Hee!"

"I ran part?way. The moon got in?to my blood, I sup?pose. That's what my da would have said."

The old wom?an's hor?ri?ble smile widened in?to some?thing that made Su?san think of

the way eels some?times seemed to grin, af?ter death and just be?fore the pot. "Aye,

but dead he is, dead these five years, Pat Del?ga?do of the red hair and beard, the life

mashed out of 'im by 'is own horse, aye, and went in?to the clear?ing at the end of

the path with the mu?sic of his own snap?ping bones in his ears, so he did!"

The ner?vous smile slipped from Su?san's face as if slapped away. She felt tears,

al?ways close at the mere men?tion of her da's name, bum at the back of her eyes.

But she would not let them fall. Not in this heart?less old crow's sight, she wouldn't.

"Let our busi?ness be quick and be done," she said in a dry voice that was far from

her usu?al one; that voice was usu?al?ly cheery and mer?ry and ready for fun. But she

was Pat Del?ga?do's child, daugh?ter of the best drover ev?er to work the West?ern

Drop, and she re?mem?bered his face very well; she could rise to a stronger na?ture if

re?quired, as it now clear?ly was. The old wom?an had meant to reach out and scratch

as deep as she could, and the more she saw that her ef?forts

were succeeded, the

more she would redouble them.

The hag, meanwhile, was watching Susan shrewdly, her bunch-knuckled hands

planted on her hips while her cat twined around her ankles. Her eyes were

rheumy, but Susan saw enough of them to realize they were the same gray-green

shade as the cat's eyes, and to wonder what sort of fell magic that might be. She

felt an urge—a strong one—to drop her eyes, and would not. It was all right to feel

fear, but sometimes a very bad idea to show it.

“You look at me pert, missy,” Rhea said at last. Her smile was dissolving slowly

into a petulant frown.

“Nay, old mother,” Susan replied evenly. “Only as one who wishes to do the

business she came for and be gone. I have come here at the wish of My Lord

Mayor of Mejis, and at that of my Aunt Cordelia, sister of my father. My dear

father, of whom I would hear no ill spoken.”

“I speak as I do,” the old woman said. The words were dismissive, yet there was a

trace of fawning servility in the hag's voice. Susan set no importance on that; it

was a tone such a thing as this had probably adopted her whole life, and came as

auto-matically as breath. “I've lived alone a long time, with no mistress but myself,

and once it begins, my tongue goes where it will.”

“Then sometimes it might be best not to let it begin at all.”

The old woman's eyes flashed uglily. “Curb your own, stripling girl, lest you find

it dead in your mouth, where it will rot and make the Mayor think twice about

kissing you when he smells its stink, aye, even under such a moon as this!”

Susan's heart filled with misery and bewilderment. She'd come up here intent on

only one thing: getting the business done as quickly as possible, a bare

explained rite that was apt to be painful and sure to be shameful. Now this old

wom?an was look?ing at her with flat and naked ha?tred. How could things have gone

wrong with such sud?den?ness? Or was it al?ways this way with witch?es?

“We have be?gun bad?ly, mis?tress—can we start over?” Su?san asked sud?den?ly, and

held out her hand.

The hag looked star?tled, al?though she did reach out and make brief con?tact, the

wrin?kled tips of her fin?gers touch?ing the short?-nailed lingers of the six?teen?-year-

old girl who stood be?fore her with her clear?-skinned face shin?ing and her long hair

braid?ed down her back. Su?san had to make a re?al ef?fort not to gri?mace at the

touch, brief as it was. The old wom?an’s fin?gers were as chilly as those of a corpse,

but Su?san had touched chilly fin?gers be?fore (“Cold hands, warm heart,” Aunt Cord

some?times said). The re?al un?pleas?ant?ness was in the tex?ture, the feel of cold flesh

spongy and loose on the bones, as if the wom?an to whom they were at?tached had

drowned and lain long in some pool.

“Nay, nay, there’s no start?ing over,” the old wom?an said, “yet may?-hap we’ll go on

bet?ter than we’ve be?gun. Ye’ve a pow?er?ful friend in the May?or, and I’d not have

him for my en?emy.”

She’s hon?est, at least, Su?san thought, then had to laugh at her?self. This wom?an

would be hon?est on?ly when she ab?so?lute?ly had to be; left to her own de?vices and

de?sires, she’d lie about ev?ery?thing—the weath?er, the crops, the flights of birds

come Reap?ing.

“Ye came be?fore I ex?pect?ed ye, and it’s put me out of tem?per, so it has. Have ye

brought me some?thing, mis?sy? Ye have, I’ll war?rant!” Her eyes were glit?ter?ing

once more, this time not with anger.

Su?san reached be?neath her apron (so stupid, wear?ing an apron for an er?rand on the

back?side of nowhere, but it was what cus?tom de?mand?ed) and in?to her pock?et.

There, tied to a string so it could not be easily lost (by young girls suddenly moved

to run in the moonlight, perhaps), was a cloth bag. Susan broke the binding

string and brought the bag out. She put it in the outstretched hand before her, the

palm so worn that the lines marking it were now little more than ghosts. She was

careful not to touch Rhea again ... although the old woman would be touching her

again, and soon.

"Is it the sound of the wind makes ye shiver?" Rhea asked, although Susan could

tell her mind was mostly fixed on the little bag; her fingers were busy tugging out

the knot in the drawstring.

"Yes, the wind."

"And so it should. 'Tis the voices of the dead you hear in the wind, and when they

scream so, 'tis because they regret—ah!"

The knot gave. She loosened the drawstring and tumbled two gold coins into her

hand. They were unevenly milled and crude—no one had made such for

generations—but they were heavy, and the eagles engraved upon them had a

certain power. Rhea lifted one to her mouth, pulled back her lips to reveal a few

gruesome teeth, and bit down. The hag looked at the faint indentations her teeth

had left in the gold. For several seconds she gazed, rapt, then closed her fingers

over them tightly.

While Rhea's attention was distracted by the coins, Susan happened to look

through the open door to her left and into what she assumed was the witch's

bedchamber. And here she saw an odd and disquieting thing: a light under the bed.

A pink, pulsing light. It seemed to be coming from some kind of box, although she

could not quite ...

The witch looked up, and Susan hastily moved her eyes to a corner of the room,

where a net containing three or four strange white fruits hung

from a hook. Then,

as the old woman moved and her huge shadow danced ponderously away from

that part of the wall, Susan saw they were not fruits at all, but skulls. She felt a

sickish drop in her stomach.

"The fire needs building up, missy. Go round to the side of the house and bring

back an armload of wood. Good-sized sticks are what's wanted, and never mind

whining ye can't lug 'em. Ye're of a strap-pin good size, so ye are!"

Susan, who had quit whining about chores around the time she had quit pissing

into her clouts, said nothing . . . although it did cross her mind to ask Rhea if

everybody who brought her gold was invited to lug her wood. In truth, she didn't

mind; the air outside would taste like wine after the stench of the hut.

She had almost reached the door when her foot struck something hot and yielding.

The cat yowled. Susan stumbled and almost fell. From behind her, the old woman

issued a series of gasping, choking sounds which Susan even though rarely recognized as

laughter.

"Watch Musty, my little sweet one! Tricksy, he is! And tripsy as well, sometimes, so

he is! Hee!" And off she went, in another gale.

The cat looked up at Susan, its ears laid back, its gray-green eyes wide. It hissed at

her. And Susan, unaware she was going to do it until it was done, hissed back.

Like its expression of contempt, Musty's look of surprise was eerily—and, in this

case, comical—human. It turned and fled for Rhea's bedroom, its split tail

lashing. Susan opened the door and went outside to get the wood. Already she felt

as if she had been here a thousand years, and that it might be a thousand more

before she could go home.

and for a mo?ment

she on?ly stood on the stoop, breath?ing it in, try?ing to cleanse her lungs . . . and her mind.

Af?ter five good breaths, she got her?self in mo?tion. Around the side of the house

she went... but it was the wrong side, it seemed, for there was no wood?pile here.

There was a nar?row ex?cuse for a win?dow, how?ev?er, half-?buried in some tough and

unlove?ly creep?er. It was to?ward the back of the hut, and must look in on the old

wom?an's sleep?ing clos?et.

Don't look in there, what?ev?er she's got un?der her bed isn't your busi ness, and if

she were to catch you. . .

She went to the win?dow de?spite these ad?mo?ni?tions, and peeked in.

It was un?like?ly that Rhea would have seen Su?san's face through the dense

over?growth of pig ivy even if the old be?som had been look?ing in that di?rec?tion,

and she wasn't. She was on her knees, the draw?string bag caught in her teeth,

reach?ing un?der the bed.

She brought out a box and opened its lid, which was al?ready ajar. Her face was

flood?ed with soft pink ra?di?ance, and Su?san gasped. For one mo ment it was the

face of a young girl—but one filled with cru?el?ty as well as youth, the face of a self-

willed child de?ter?mined to learn all the wrong things for all the wrong rea?sons.

The face of the girl this hag once had been, may?hap. The light ap?peared to be

com?ing from some sort of glass ball.

The old wom?an looked at it for sev?er?al mo?ments, her eyes wide and fas?ci?nat?ed.

Her lips moved as if she were speak?ing to it or per?haps even singing to it; the lit?tle

bag Su?san had brought from town, its string still clamped in the hag's mouth,

bobbed up and down as she spoke. Then, with what ap?peared to be great ef?fort of

will, she closed the box, cut?ting off the rosy light. Su?san found

her?self

re?lieved—there was some?thing about it she didn't like.

The old wom?an cupped one hand over the sil?ver lock in the mid?dle of the lid, and

a brief scar?let light spiked out from be?tween her fin?gers. All this with the

draw?string bag still hang?ing from her mouth. Then she put the box on the bed,

knelt, and be?gan run?ning her hands over the dirt just be?neath the bed's edge.

Al?though she touched on?ly with her palms, lines ap?peared as if she had used a

draw?ing tool. These lines dark?ened, be?com ing what looked like grooves.

The wood, Su?s?san! Gel the wood be?fore she wakes up to how long you've been

gone! For your fa?ther's sake!

Su?s?san pulled the skirt of her dress all the way up to her waist—she did not want

the old wom?an to see dirt or leaves on her cloth?ing when she came back in?side, did

not want to an?swer the ques?tions the sight of such smuts might pro?voke—and

crawled be?neath the win?dow with her white cot?ton draw?ers flash?ing in the

moon?light. Once she was past, she got to her feet again and hur?ried qui?et?ly around

to the far side of the hut. Here she found the wood?pile un?der an old, moldy-

smelling hide. She took half a dozen good-?sized chunks and walked back to?ward

the front of the house with them in her arms.

When she en?tered, turn?ing side?ways to get her load through the door way with?out

drop?ping any, the old wom?an was back in the main room, star?ing mood?ily in?to the

fire?place, where there was now lit?tle more than em?bers; Of the draw?string bag

there was no sign.

“Took; you long enough, mis?sy,” Rhea said. She con?tin?ued to look in?to the

fire?place, as if Su?s?san were of no ac?count... but one foot tapped be?low the dirty

hem of her dress, and her eye?brows were drawn to?geth?er.

Su?s?san crossed the room, peer?ing over the load of wood in her

arms as well as she

could while she walked. It wouldn't surprise her a bit to spy the cat lurking near,

hoping to trip her up. "I saw a spider," she said. "I flapped my apron at it to make

it run away. I hate the look of them, so I do."

"You'll see something you like the look of even less, soon enough," Rhea said,

grinning her peculiar one-sided grin. "Out of old Thorin's nightshirt it'll come, stiff

as a stick and as red as rhubarb! Hee! Hold a minute, girl; ye gods, ye've brought

enough for a Fair-day bonfire."

Rhea took two fat logs from Susan's pile and tossed them in different ones to the

coals. Embers spiraled up the dark and faintly roaring shaft of the chimney. There,

you've scattered what's left of your fire, ye silly old thing, and will likely have to

rekindle the whole mess, Susan thought. Then Rhea reached in to the fireplace with

one splayed hand, spoke a guttural word, and the logs blazed up as if soaked in

oil.

"Put the rest over there," she said, pointing at the woodbox. "And mind you not be a

scatterer, missy."

What, and dirty all this neat? Susan thought. She bit the inside of her cheeks to

kill the smile that wanted to rise on her mouth.

Rhea might have sensed it, however; when Susan straightened again, the old

woman was looking at her with a dour, knowing expression.

"All right, mistress, let's do our business and have it done. Do you know why you're here?"

"I am here at Mayor Thorin's wish," Susan repeated, knowing that was no real

answer. She was frightened now—more frightened than when she had looked

through the window and seen the old woman crooning to the glass ball. "His wife

has come barren to the end of her courses. He wishes to have a son before he is

al?so un?able to—“

”Pish-?tush, spare me the codswal?lop and pret?ty words. He wants tits and ar?se that

don’t squish in his hands and a box that’ll grip what he push?es. If he’s still man

enough to push it, that is. If a son come of it, aye, fine, he’ll give it over to ye to

keep and raise un?til it’s old enough to school, and af?ter that ye’ll see it no more. If

it’s a daugh?ter, he’ll like?ly take it from ye and give it to his new man, the one with

the girl’s hair and the limp, to drown in the near?est cat?tle-?wal?low.“

Su?san stared at her, shocked out of all mea?sure.

The old wom?an saw the look and laughed. ”Don’t like the sound of the truth, do

yer? Few do, mis?sy. But that’s nei?ther here nor there; yer aun?tie was ev?er a trig

one, and she’ll have done all right out of Thorin and Thorin’s trea?sury. What gold

you see of it’s none o’ mine . . . and won’t be none o’ yours, ei?ther, if you don’t

watch sharp! Hee! Take off that dress!”

I won’t was what rose to her lips, but what then? To be turned out of this hut (and

to be turned out pret?ty much as she had come, and not as a lizard or a hop?ping toad

would prob?ably be the best luck she could hope for) and sent west as she was now,

with?out even the two gold coins she’d brought up here? And that was on?ly the

small half of it. The large was that she had giv?en her word. At first she had

re?sist?ed, but when Aunt Cord had in?voked her fa?ther’s name, she had giv?en in. As

she al?ways did. Re?al?ly, she had no choice.” And when there was no choice,

hes?ita?tion was ev?er a fault.

She brushed the front of her apron, to which small bits of bark now clung, then

un?tied it and took it off. She fold?ed it, laid it on a small, grimy has?sock near the

hearth, and un?but?toned her dress to the waist. She shiv ered it from her shoul?ders,

and stepped out. She fold?ed it and laid it atop the apron, try?

ing not to mind the

greedy way Rhea of Coos was staring at her in the firelight. The cat came

sashaying across the floor, grotesque extra legs hobbling, and sat at Rhea's feet.

Outside, the wind gusted. It was warm on the hearth but Susan was cold just the

same, as if that wind had gotten inside her, somehow.

"Hurry, girl, for yer father's sake!"

Susan pulled her shift over her head, folded it atop the dress, then stood in only

her drawers, with her arms folded over her bosom. The fire painted warm orange

highlights along her thighs; black circles of shadow in the tender folds behind her

knees.

"And still she's not nekkid!" the old crow laughed. "Ain't we lah-di-dah! Aye, we

are, very fine! Take off those drawers, mistress, and stand as ye slid from yer

mother! Although ye had not so many goodies as to interest the likes of Hart

Thorin then, did ye? Hee!"

Feeling caught in a nightmare, Susan did as she was bid. With her mound and

bush uncovered, her crossed arms seemed foolish. She lowered them to her sides.

"Ah, no wonder he wants ye!" the old woman said. "Tis beautiful ye are, and true!

Is she not, Musty?"

The cat waowed.

"There's dirt on yer knees," Rhea said suddenly. "How came it there?" \

Susan felt a moment of awful panic. She had lifted her skirts to crawl beneath the

hag's window . . . and hung herself by doing it.

Then an answer rose to her lips, and she spoke it calmly enough. "When I came in

sight of your hut, I grew fearful. I knelt to pray, and raised my skirt so as not to

soil it."

"I'm touched—to want a clean dress for the likes o' me! How good y'are! Don't

you agree, Musty?"

The cat waowed, then began to lick one of its forepaws.

"Get on with it," Su?san said. "You've been paid and I'll obey, but stop teas?ing and have done."

"You know what it is I have to do, mis?tress."

"I don't," Su?san said. The tears were close again, burn?ing the backs of her eyes,

but she would not let them fall. Would not. "I have an idea, but when I asked Aunt

Cord if I was right, she said that you'd 'take care of my ed?uca?tion in that re?gard.' "

"Wouldn't dirty her mouth with the words, would she? Well, that's all right. Yer

Aunt Rhea's not too nice to say what yer Aunt Cordelia won't. I'm to make sure

that ye're phys?ical?ly and spir?itu?al?ly in?tact, mis?sy.

Prov?ing hon?esty is what the old ones called it, and it's a good enough name. So it

is. Step to me."

Su?san took two re?luc?tant steps for?ward, so that her bare toes were al most

touch?ing the old wom?an's slip?pers and her bare breasts were al?most touch?ing the

old wom?an's dress.

"If a dev?il or de?mon has pol?lut?ed yer spir?it, such a thing as might taint the child

you'll like?ly bear, it leaves a mark be?hind. Most of?ten it's a suck?-mark or a lover's

bite, but there's oth?ers . . . open yer mouth!"

Su?san did, and when the old wom?an bent clos?er, the reek of her was so strong that

the girl's stom?ach clenched. She held her breath, pray?ing this would be over soon.

"Run out yer tongue."

Su?san ran out her tongue.

"Now send yer breezes in?to my face."

Su?san ex?haled her held breath. Rhea breathed it in and then, mer?ci ful?ly, pulled

her head away a lit?tle. She had been close enough for Su?san to see the lice hop?ping

in her hair.

"Sweet enough," the old wom?an said. "Aye, good's a meal. Now turn around."

Su?san did, and felt the old witch's fin?gers trail down her back and to her but?tocks.

Their tips were cold as mud.

"Bend over and spread yer cheeks, mis?sy, be not shy, Rhea's seen more than one

pul?try in her time!"

Face flush?ing—she could feel the beat of her heart in the center of her forehead

and in the hollows of her temples—Su?san did as told. And then she felt one of

those corpse?like fingers prod its way into her anus. Su?san bit her lips to keep from

scream?ing.

The invasion was merciful?ly short ... but there would be another, Su san feared.

"Turn around."

She turned. The old woman passed her hands over Su?san's breasts, flicked light?ly

at the nipples with her thumbs, then examined the undersides carefully. Rhea

slipped a finger into the cup of the girl's navel, then hitched up her own skirt and

dropped to her knees with a grunt of effort. She passed her hands down Su?san's

legs, first front, then back. She seemed to take special pains with the area just

below the calves, where the ten dons ran.

"Lift yer right foot, girl."

Su?san did, and uttered a nervous, screamy laugh as Rhea ran a thumb nail down

her instep to her heel. The old woman parted her toes, looking between each pair.

After this process had been repeated with the other foot, the old woman—still on

her knees—said: "You know what comes next."

"Aye." The word came out of her in a little trembling rush.

"Hold ye still, mis?sy—all else is well, clean as a willow-strip, ye are, but now

we've come to the cozy nook that's all Thorin cares for; we've come to where

honesty must really be proved. So hold ye still!"

Su?san closed her eyes and thought of horses running along the Drop—normally

they were the Barony's horse, overlooked by Rimer, Thorin's Chancellor and the

Barony's Minister of Inventory, but the horses didn't know that; they thought they

were free, and if you were free in your mind, what else mat?

tered?

Let me be free in my mind, as free as the horses along the Drop, and don't let her

hurt me. Please, don't let her hurt me. And if she does, please help me to bear it in

decency.

Cold fingers parted the downy hair below her navel; there was a pause, and then

two cold fingers slipped inside her. There was pain, but only a moment of it, and

not bad; she'd hurt herself worse stubbing her toe or banging her shin on the way to

the privy in the middle of the night. The humiliation was the bad part, and the

revulsion of Rhea's ancient touch.

"Caulked tight, ye are!" Rhea cried. "Good as ever was! But Thorin'll see to that,

so he will! As for you, my girl, I'll tell yer a secret yer prisya aunt with her long

nose 'n tight purse 'n little goosebump tits ne'er knew: even a girl who's intact

don't need to lack for a shiver now 'n then, if she knows how!"

The hag's withdrawing fingers closed gently around the little nubbin of flesh at the

head of Susan's cleft. For one terrible second Susan thought they would pinch that

sensitive place, which sometimes made her draw in a breath if it rubbed just so

against the pommel of her saddle when she was riding, but instead the fingers

caressed . . . then pressed ... and the girl was horrified to feel a heat which was far

from unpleasant kinde in her belly.

"Like a little bud o' silk," the old woman crooned, and her meddling fingers moved

faster. Susan felt her hips sway forward, as if with a mind and life of their own,

and then she thought of the old woman's greedy, self-willed face, pink as the face

of a whore by gaslight as it hung over the open box; she thought of the way the

drawstring bag with the gold pieces in it had hung from the wrinkled mouth like

some disgorged piece of flesh, and the heat she felt was gone. She drew back,

trem?bling, her arms and bel?ly and breasts break?ing out in goose?flesh.

“You’ve fin?ished what you were paid to do,” Su?san said. Her voice was dry and harsh.

Rhea’s face knot?ted. “Ye’ll not tell me aye, no, yes, or maybe, im?pu dent stripling

of a girl! I know when I’m done, I, Rhea, the Weird?ing of Coos, and—”

“Be still, and be on your feet be?fore I kick you in?to the fire, un?nat?ural thing.”

The old wom?an’s lips wrig?gled back from her few re?main?ing teeth in a dog?like

sneer, and now, Su?san re?al?ized, she and the witch-?wom?an were back where they

had been at the start: ready to claw each oth?er’s eyes out.

“Raise hand or foot to me, you im?pu?dent cunt, and what leaves my house will

leave hand?less, foot?less, and blind of eye.”

“I do not much doubt you could do it, but Thorin should be vexed,” Su?san said. It

was the first time in her life she had ev?er in?voked a man’s name for pro?tec?tion.

Re?al?iz?ing this made her feel ashamed . . . small, some?how. She didn’t know why

that should be, es?pe?cial?ly since she had agreed to sleep in his bed and bear his

child, but it was.

The old wom?an stared, her seamed face work?ing un?til it fold?ed in?to a par?ody of a

smile that was worse than her snarl. Puff?ing and pulling at the, arm of her chair,

Rhea got to her feet. As she did, Su?san quick?ly be?gan to dress.

“Aye, vexed he would be. Per?haps you know best af?ter all, mis?sy;

I’ve had a strange night, and it’s wak?ened parts of me bet?ter left asleep. Any?thing

else that might have hap?pened, take it as a com?pli?ment to yer youth’n pu?ri?ty . . .

and to yer beau?ty as well. Aye. You’re a beau?ti?ful thing, and there’s no doubt in it.

Yer hair, now . . . when yer let it down, as ye will for Thorin, I wot, when ye lay

with him ... it glows like the sun, doesn’t it?”

Su?san did not want to force the old hag out of her pos?tur?ing, but she didn't want to

en?cour?age these fawn?ing com?pli?ments, ei?ther. Not when she could still see the

hate in Rhea's rheumy eyes, not when she could feel the old wom?an's touch still

crawl?ing like bee?tles on her skin. She said noth?ing, on?ly stepped in?to her dress, set

it on her shoul?ders, and be?gan to but?ton up the front.

Rhea per?haps un?der?stood the run of her thoughts, for the smile dropped off her

mouth and her man?ner grew busi?nesslike. Su?san found this a great re?lief.

"Well, nev?er mind it. Ye've proved hon?est; ye may dress yer?self and go. But not a

word of what passed be?tween us to Thorin, mind ye! Words be?tween wom?en need

trou?ble no man's ear, es?pe?cial?ly one as great as he." Yet at this Rhea could not

for?bear a cer?tain spas?ming sneer. Su?san didn't know if the old wom?an was aware

of it or not. "Are we agreed?"

Any?thing, any?thing, just as long as I can be out of here and away.

"You de?clare me proved?"

"Aye, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick. So I do. But it's not what I say that mat?ters. Now

... wait... some?where here ..."

She scrab?bled along the man?tel, push?ing stubs of can?dles stuck on cracked saucers

this way and that, lift?ing first a kerosene lantern and then a bat?tery flash?light,

look?ing fixed?ly for a mo?ment at a draw?ing of a young boy and then putting it

aside.

"Where . . . where . . . ar?rrrr.. . here!"

She snatched up a pad of pa?per with a sooty cov?er (cit?go stamped on it in an?cient

gold let?ters) and a stub of pen?cil. She paged al?most to the end of the pad be?fore

find?ing a blank sheet. On it she scrawled some?thing, then tore the sheet off the

spi?ral of wire at the top of the pad. She held the sheet out to Su?san, who took it

and looked at it. Scrawled there was a word she did not un?der?

stand at first:

Be?low it was a sym?bol:

“What’s this?” she asked, tap?ping the lit?tle draw?ing. “Rhea, her mark. Known for

six Ba?ronies around, it is, and can’t be copied. Show that pa?per to yer aunt. Then

to Thorin. If yer aunt wants to take it and show it to Thorin her?self—I know her,

y’see, and her bossy ways—tell her no, Rhea says no, she’s not to have the keep?ing

of it.” “And if Thorin wants it?”

Rhea shrugged dis?mis?sive?ly. “Let him keep it or bum it or wipe his bum with it,

for all of me. It’s noth?ing to you, ei?ther, for you knew you were hon?est all along,

so you did. True?”

Su?san nod?ded. Once, walk?ing home af?ter a dance, she had let a boy slip his hand

in?side her shirt for a mo?ment or two, but what of that? She was hon?est. And in

more ways than this nasty crea?ture meant.

“But don’t lose that pa?per. Un?less you’d see me again, that is, and go through the

same busi?ness a sec?ond time.”

Gods per?ish even the thought, Su?san thought, and man?aged not to shud?der. She

put the pa?per in her pock?et, where the draw?string bag had been.

“Now, come to the door, mis?sy.” She looked as if she want?ed to grasp Su?san’s arm,

then thought bet?ter of it. The two of them walked side by side to the door, not

touch?ing in such a care?ful way that it made them look awk?ward. Once there, Rhea

did grip Su?san’s arm. Then, with her oth?er hand, she point?ed to the bright sil?ver

disc hang?ing over the top of the Coos.

“The Kiss?ing Moon,” Rhea said. “ ‘Tis mid?sum?mer.”

“Yes.”

“Tell Thorin he’s not to have you in his bed—or in a haystack, or on the scullery

floor, or any?where else—un?til De?mon Moon ris?es full in the sky.”

“Not un?til Reap?ing?” That was three months—a life?time, it seemed to her. Su?san

tried not to show her de?light at this re?prieve. She'd thought Thorin would put an

end to her vir?gin?ity by moon?rise the next night. She wasn't blind to the way he looked at her.

Rhea, mean?while, was look?ing at the moon, seem?ing to cal?cu?late. Her hand went

to the long tail of Su?san's hair and stroked it. Su?san bore this as well as she could,

and just when she felt she could bear it no longer, Rhea dropped her hand back to

her side and nod?ded. "Aye, not just Reap?ing, but true fin de ano—Fair-?Night, tell

him. Say that he may have you af?ter the bon?fire. You un?der?stand?"

"True fin de ano, yes." She could bare?ly con?tain her joy.

"When the fire in Green Heart bums low and the last of the red-?hand?ed men are

ash?es," Rhea said. "Then and not un?til then. You must tell him so."

"I will."

The hand came out and be?gan to stroke her hair again. Su?san bore it.

Af?ter such good news, she thought, it would have been mean-?spir?it?ed to do

oth?er?wise. "The time be?tween now and Reap?ing you will use to me?di tate, and to

gath?er your forces to pro?duce the male child the May?or wants ... or may?hap just to

ride along the Drop and gath?er the last flow?ers of your maid?en?hood. Do you

un?der?stand?"

"Yes." She dropped a curt?sey. "Thankee-?sai."

Rhea waved this off as if it were a flat?tery. "Speak not of what passed be?tween us,

mind. 'Tis no one's af?fair but our own."

"I won't. And our busi?ness is done?"

"Well ... may?hap there's one more small thing ..." Rhea smiled to show it was

in?deed small, then raised her left hand in front of Su?san's eyes with three fin?gers

to?geth?er and one apart. Glim?mer?ing in the fork be tween was a sil?ver medal?lion,

seem?ing?ly pro?duced from nowhere. The girl's eyes fas?tened on it at once. Un?til

Rhea spoke a sin?gle gut?tural word, that was.

Then they closed.

5

Rhea looked at the girl who stood asleep on her stoop in the moon?light. As she

re?placed the medal?lion with?in her sleeve (her fin?gers were old and bunchy, but

they moved dex?ter?ous?ly enough when it was re?quired, oh, aye), the busi?nesslike

ex?pres?sion fell from her face, and was re?placed by a look of squint?ey?ed fury. Kick

me in?to the fire, would you, you trull? Tat tle to Thorin? But her threats and

im?pu?dence weren't the worst. The worst had been the ex?pres?sion of re?vul?sion on

her face when she had pulled back from Rhea's touch.

Too good for Rhea, she was! And thought her?self too good for Thorin as well, no

doubt, she with six?teen years' worth of fine blonde hair hang ing down from her

head, hair Thorin no doubt dreamed of plung?ing his hands in? to even as he plunged

and reared and plowed down be?low.

She couldn't hurt the girl, much as she want?ed to and much as the girl de?served it;

if noth?ing else, Thorin might take the glass ball away from her, and Rhea couldn't

bear that. Not yet, any?way. So she could not hurt the girl, but she could do

some?thing that would spoil his plea?sure in her, at least for awhile.

Rhea leaned close to the girl, grasped the long braid which lay down her back, and

be?gan to slip it through her fist, en?joy?ing its silky smooth? ness.

"Su?s?san," she whis?pered. "Do'ee hear me, Su?s?san, daugh?ter of Patrick?"

"Yes." The eyes did not open.

"Then lis?ten." The light of the Kiss?ing Moon fell on Rhea's face and turned it in?to

a sil?ver skull. "Lis?ten to me well, and re?mem?ber. Re?mem?ber in the deep cave

where yer wak?ing mind nev?er goes."

She pulled the braid through her hand again and again. Silky and ?| smooth.

Like the lit?tle bud be?tween her legs.

“Re?mem?ber,” the girl in the door?way said.

“Aye. There’s some?thing ye’ll do af?ter he takes yer vir?gin?ity. Ye’ll do it right away,

with?out even think?ing about it. Now lis?ten to me, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick, and hear me very well.”

Still stroking the girl’s hair, Rhea put her wrin?kled lips to the smooth cup of

Su?san’s ear and whis?pered in the moon?light.

C H A P T E R III

A MEET?ING ON

THE ROAD

1

She had nev?er in her life had such a strange night, and it was prob?ably not

sur?pris?ing that she didn’t hear the rid?er ap?proach?ing from be?hind un?til he was

al?most up?on her.

The thing that trou?bled her most as she made her way back to?ward town was her

new un?der?stand?ing of the com?pact she had made. It was good to have a

re?prieve—months yet be?fore she would have to live up to her end of the

bar?gain—but a re?prieve didn’t change the ba?sic fact: when the De?mon Moon was

full, she would lose her vir?gin?ity to May?or Thorin, a skin?ny, twitchy man with

fluffy white hair ris?ing like a cloud around the bald spot on top of his head. A man

whose wife re?gard?ed him with a cer tain weary sad?ness that was painful to look at.

Hart Thorin was a man who laughed up?roar?ious?ly when a com?pa?ny of play?ers put

on an en?ter tain?ment in?volv?ing head-?knock?ing or pre?tend punch?ing or rot?ten fruit-

throw?ing, but who on?ly looked puz?zled at a sto?ry which was pa?thet?ic or trag?ical. A

knuck?le-?crack?er, a back-?slap?per, a din?ner-?ta?ble belch?er, a man who had a way of

look?ing anx?ious?ly to?ward his Chan?cel?lor at al?most ev?ery oth?er word, as if to make

sure he hadn’t of?fend?ed Rimer in some way.

Su?san had ob?served all these things of?ten; her fa?ther had for

years been in charge

of the Barony's horse and had gone to Seafront of?ten on busi?ness. Many times he

had tak?en his much loved daugh?ter with him. Oh, she had seen a lot of Hart Thorin

over the years, and he had seen a lot of her, as well. Too much, may?hap! For what

now seemed the most im por?tant fact about him was that he was al?most fifty years

old?er than the girl who would per?haps bear his son.

She had made the bar?gain light?ly enough—

No, not light?ly, that was be?ing un?fair to her?self... but she had lost lit?tle sleep over

it, that much was true. She had thought, af?ter lis?ten?ing to all Aunt Cord's

ar?gu?ments: Well, it's lit?tle enough, re?al?ly, to have the in den?ture off the lands; to

fi?nal?ly own our lit?tle piece of the Drop in fact as well as in tra?di?tion . . . to ac?tu?al?ly

have pa?pers, one in our house and one in Rimer's files, say?ing it's ours. Aye, and

to have hors?es again. On?ly three, 'tis true, but that's three more than we have now.

And against that? To lie with him a time or two, and to bear a child, which

mil?lions of wom?en have done be?fore me with no harm. 'Tis not, af?ter all, a mu?tant

or a lep?er I'm be?ing asked to part?ner with but just an old man with noisy knuck?les.

'Tis not for?ev?er, and, as Aunt Cord says, I may still mar?ry, if time and ka de?cree; I

should not be the first wom?an to come to her hus band's bed as a moth?er. And

does it make me a whore to do such? The law says not, but nev?er mind that; my

heart's law is what mat?ters, and my heart says that if I may gain the land that was

my da's and three hors?es to run on it by be?ing such, then it's a whore I'll be.

There was some?thing else: Aunt Cord had cap?ital?ized—rather ruth less?ly, Su?san

now saw—on a child's in?no?cence. It was the ba?by Aunt Cord had harped on, the

cun?ning lit?tle ba?by she would have. Aunt Cord had known that Su?san, the dolls of

her child?hood put aside not all that long ago, would love the idea of her own ba?by,

a lit?tle liv?ing doll to dress and feed and sleep with in the heat of the af?ter?noon.

What Cordelia had ig?nored (per?haps she's too in?no?cent even to have con?sid?ered it,

Su?san thought, but didn't quite be?lieve) was what the hag?wom?an had made

bru?tal?ly clear to her this evening: Thorin want?ed more than a child.

He wants tits and ar?se that don't squish in his hands and a box that 'll grip what he

push?es.

Just think?ing of those words made her face throb as she walked through the post-

moon?set dark to?ward town (no high?spir?ited run?ning this time; no singing, ei?ther).

She had agreed with vague thoughts of how man?aged live?stock mat?ed—they were

al?lowed to go at it "un?til the seed took," then sep?arat?ed again. But now she knew

that Thorin might want her again and again, prob?ably would want her again and

again, and com mon law go?ing back like iron for two hun?dred gen?er?ations said

that he could con?tin?ue to lie with her un?til she who had proved the con?sort hon?est

should prove her hon?est?ly with child as well, and that child hon?est in and of it?self .

. . not, that was, a mu?tant aber?ra?tion. Su?san had made dis?cree?n?quiries and knew

that this sec?ond prov?ing usu?al?ly came around the fourth month of preg?nan?cy ...

around the time she would be?gin to show, even with her clothes on. It would be up

to Rhea to make the judg?ment... and Rhea didn't like her.

Now that it was too late—now that she had ac?cept?ed the com?pact for mal?ly

ten?dered by the Chan?cel?lor, now that she had been proved hon?est by yon strange

bitch—she rued the bar?gain. Most?ly what she thought of was how Thorin would

look with his pants off, his legs white and skin?ny, like the legs of a stork, and how,

as they lay to?geth?er, she would hear his long bones crack?ling:

knees and back and

elbows and neck.

And knuckles. Don't forget his knuckles.

Yes. Big old man's knuckles with hair growing out of them. Susan chuckled at the

thought, it was that comical, but at the same time a warm tear ran unnoticed from

the corner of one eye and tracked down her cheek. She wiped it away without

knowing it, any more than she heard the clip-clip of approaching hoofs in the soft

road-dust. Her mind was still far away, returning to the odd thing she had seen

through the old woman's bedroom window—the soft but somehow unpleasant

light coming from the pink globe, the hypnotized way the hag had been looking

down at it...

When Susan at last heard the approaching horse, her first alarmed thought was that

she must get into the copse of trees she was currently passing and hide. The

chances of anyone aboveboard being on the road this late seemed small to her,

especially now that such bad times had come to Mid-World—but it was too late

for that.

The ditch, then, and sprawled flat. With the moon down, there was at least a

chance that whoever it was would pass without—

But before she could even begin in that direction, the rider who had sneaked up

behind her while she was thinking her long and rueful thoughts had hailed her.

“Good-even, lady, and may your days be long upon the earth.”

She turned, thinking: What if it's one of the new men always lounging about

Mayor's House or in the Travellers' Rest? Not the oldest one, the voice isn't

was very like his, but maybe one of the others . . . it could be the one they call

De-pape...

“Good-even,” she heard herself saying to the man shape on the tall horse. “May

yours be long al?so.”

Her voice didn’t trem?ble, not that she could hear. She didn’t think it was De?pape,

or the one named Reynolds, ei?ther. The on?ly thing she could tell about the fel?low

for sure was that he wore a flat-?brimmed hat, the sort she as?so?ci?at?ed with men of

the In?ner Ba?ronies, back when trav?el be?tween east and west had been more

com?mon than it was now. Back be?fore John Far?son came—the Good Man—and

the blood?let?ting be?gan.

As the stranger came up be?side her, she for?gave her?self a lit?tle for not hear?ing him

ap?proach—there was no buck?le or bell on his gear that she could see, and

ev?ery?thing was tied down so as not to snap or flap. It was al?most the rig of an

out?law or a har?ri?er (she had the idea that Jonas, he of the wa?very voice, and his

two friends might have been both, in oth?er times and oth?er climes) or even a

gun?slinger. But this man bore no guns, un?less they were hid?den. A bow on the

pom?mel of his sad?dle and what looked like a lance in a scab?bard, that was all. And

there had nev?er, she reck?oned, been a gun?slinger as young as this.

He clucked side?mouth at the horse just as her da had al?ways done (and she her?self,

of course), and it stopped at once. As he swung one leg over his sad?dle, lift?ing it

high and with un?con?scious grace, Su?san said:

“Nay, nay, don’t trou?ble yer?self, stranger, but go as ye would!”

If he heard the alarm in her voice, he paid no heed to it. He slipped off the horse,

not both?er?ing with the tied-?down stir?rup, and land?ed neat?ly in front of her, the dust

of the road puff?ing about his square-?toed boots. By starlight she saw that he was

young in?deed, close to her own age on one side or the oth?er. His clothes were

those of a work?ing cow?boy, al though new.

“Will Dear?born, at your ser?vice,” he said, then doffed his hat, ex?tend?ed a foot on

one boothleel, and bowed as they did in the In?ner Ba?ronies.

Such ab?surd court?li?ness out here in the mid?dle of nowhere, with the acrid smell of

the oil patch on the edge of town al?ready in her nos?trils, star?tled her out of her fear

and in?to a laugh. She thought it would like?ly of?fend him, but he smiled in?stead. A

good smile, hon?est and art?less, its in?ner part lined with even teeth.

She dropped him a lit?tle curt?sey, hold?ing out one side of her dress. "Su?san

Del?ga?do, at yours."

He tapped his throat thrice with his right hand. "Thankee-?sai, Su?san Del?ga?do.

We're well met, I hope. I didn't mean to star?tle you—"

"Ye did, a lit?tle."

"Yes, I thought I had. I'm sor?ry."

Yes. Not aye but yes. A young man, from the In?ner Ba?ronies, by the sound. She

looked at him with new in?ter?est.

"Nay, ye need not apol?ogize, for I was deep in my own thoughts," she said. "I'd

been to see a ... friend ... and hadn't re?al?ized how much time had passed un?til I saw

the moon was down. If ye stopped out of con?cern, I thankee, stranger, but ye may

be on yer way as I would be on mine. It's on?ly to the edge of the vil?lage I

go—Ham?bry. It's close, now."

"Pret?ty speech and love?ly sen?ti?ments," he an?swered with a grin, "but it's late,

you're alone, and I think we may as well pass on to?geth?er. Do you ride, sai?"

"Yes, but re?al?ly—"

"Step over and meet my friend Rush?er, then. He shall car?ry you the last two miles.

He's geld?ed, sai, and gen?tle."

She looked at Will Dear?born with a mix?ture of amuse?ment and ir?ri?ta tion. The

thought which crossed her mind was If he calls me sai again, as though I were a

schoolteach?er or his dod?dery old great aunt, I'm go?ing to take off this stupid apron

and swat him with it. "I nev?er mind?ed a bit of tem?per in a horse docile enough to

wear a sad?dle. Un?til his death, my fa?ther man?aged the May?or's hors?es ... and the

May?or in these parts is al?so Guard o' Barony. I've rid?den my whole life."

She thought he might apol?ogize, per?haps even stut?ter, but he on?ly nod?ded with a

calm thought?ful?ness that she rather liked. "Then step to the stir?rup, my la?dy. I'll

walk be?side and trou?ble you with no con?ver?sa?tion, if you'd rather not have it. It's

late, and talk palls af?ter moon?set, some say."

She shook her head, soft?en?ing her re?fusai?l with a smile. "Nay. I thank ye for yer

kind?ness, but it would not be well, may?hap, for me to be seen rid?ing a strange

young man's horse at eleven o' the clock. Lemon?-?juice won't take the stain out of a

la?dy's rep?uta?tion the way it will out of a shirt waist, you know."

"There's no one out here to see you," the young man said in a mad den?ing?ly

rea?son?able voice. "And that you're tired, I can tell. Come, sai?—"

"Please don't call me that. It makes me feel as an?cient as a . . ." She hes?itat?ed for a

brief mo?ment, re?think?ing the word (witch)

that first came to her mind. ". . . as an old wom?an."

"Miss Del?ga?do, then. Are you sure you won't ride?"

"Sure as can be. I'd not ride cross?-?sad?dle in a dress in any case, Mr. Dear?born—not

even if you were my own broth?er. "Twouldn't be prop?er."

He stood in the stir?rup him?self, reached over to the far side of his sad?dle (Rush?er

stood docile?ly enough at this, on?ly flick?ing his ears, which Su?san would have been

hap?py to flick her?self had she been Rush?er—they were that beau?ti?ful), and stepped

back down with a rolled gar?ment in his hands. It was tied with a rawhide hank.

She thought it was a pon?cho.

"You may spread this over your lap and legs like a duster," he said. "There's quite

enough of it for deco?rum's sake—it was my fa?ther's, and he's taller than me." He

looked off to?ward the west?ern hills for a mo?ment, and she saw he was hand?some,

in a hard sort of way that jagged against his youth. She felt a little shiver in?side

her, and wished for the thousandth time that the foul old woman had kept her

hands strictly on her business, as unpleasant as that business had been. Susan

didn't want to look at this handsome stranger and remember Rhea's touch.

"Nay," she said gently. "Thankee again, I recognize yer kindness, but I must refuse."

"Then I'll walk along beside, and Rusher'll be our chaperone," he said cheerfully.

"As far as the edge of town, at least, there'll be no eyes to see and think ill of a

perfectly proper young woman and a more-or-less proper young man. And once

there, I'll tip my hat and wish you a very good night."

"I wish ye wouldn't. Really." She brushed a hand across her forehead. "Easy for

you to say there are no eyes to see, but sometimes there are eyes even where there

shouldn't be. And my position is ... a little delicate just now."

"I'll walk with you, however," he repeated, and now his face was somber. "These

are not good times. Miss Delgado. Here in Mejis you are far from the worst of the

troubles, but sometimes trouble reaches out."

She opened her mouth—to protest again, she supposed, perhaps to tell him that Pat

Delgado's daughter could take care of herself—and then she thought of the

Mayor's new men, and the cold way they had run their eyes over her when

Thorin's attention had been elsewhere. She had seen those three this very night as

she left on her way to the witch's hut. Then she had heard approach, and in

plenty of time for her to leave the road and rest behind a handy pinon tree (she

refused to think of it as hiding, exactly). Back toward town they had gone, and

she sup?posed they were drink?ing at the Trav?ellers' Rest right now—and would

con?tin?ue to un?til Stan?ley Ruiz closed the bar—but she had no way of know?ing that

for sure. They could come back.

“If I can't dis?sua?de ye, very well,” she said, sigh?ing with a vexed res ig?na?tion she

didn't re?al?ly feel. “But on?ly to the first mail?box—Mrs. Beech's. That marks the edge of town.”

He tapped his throat again, and made an?oth?er of those ab?surd, en chant?ing

bows—foot stuck out as if he would trip some?one, heel plant?ed in the dirt.

“Thankee, Miss Del?ga?do!”

At least he didn't 't call me sai, she thought. That's a start.

2

She thought he'd chat?ter away like a mag?pie in spite of his promise to be silent,

be?cause that was what boys did around her—she was not vain of her looks, but she

thought she was good-?look?ing, if on?ly be?cause the boys could not shut up or stop

shuf?fling their feet when they were around her. And this one would be full of

ques?tions the town boys didn't need to ask—how old was she, had she al?ways

lived in Ham?bry, were her par?ents alive, half a hun?dred oth?ers just as bor?ing—but

they would all cir?cle in on the same one: did she have a steady fel?low?

But Will Dear?born of the In?ner Ba?ronies didn't ask her about her school?ing or

fam?ily or friends (the most com?mon way of ap?proach?ing any ro?man?tic ri?vals, she

had found). Will Dear?born sim?ply walked along be side her, one hand wrapped

around Rush?er's bri?dle, look?ing off east to?ward the Clean Sea. They were close

enough to it now so that the teary smell of salt min?gled with the tar?ry stench of oil,

even though the wind was from the south.

They were pass?ing Cit?go now, and she was glad for Will Dear?born's pres?ence,

even if his si?lence was a lit?tle ir?ri?tat?ing. She had al?ways

found the oil patch, with

its skeletal forest of gantries, a little spooky. Most of those steel towers had

stopped pumping long since, and there was neither the parts, the need, nor the

understanding to repair them. And those which did still labor along—nine—teen out

of about two hundred—could not be stopped. They just pumped and pumped, the

supplies of oil beneath them seemingly inexhaustible. A little was still used, but a

very little—most simply ran back down into the wells beneath the dead pumping

stations. The world had moved on, and this place reminded her of a strange

mechanical graveyard where some of the corpses hadn't quite

—

Something cold and smooth nuzzled the small of her back, and she wasn't quite

able to stifile a little shriek. Will Dearborn wheeled toward her, his hands dropping

toward his belt. Then he relaxed and smiled.

"Rusher's way of saying he feels ignored. I'm sorry, Miss Delgado."

She looked at the horse. Rusher looked back mildly, then dipped his head as if to

say he was also sorry for having startled her.

Foolishness, girl, she thought, hearing the hearty, no-nonsense voice of her father.

He wants to know why you're being so standoffish, that's all. And so do I. "Isn't like

you, so it's not.

"Mr. Dearborn, I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like to ride."

3

He turned his back and stood looking out at Citgo with his hands in his pockets

while Susan first laid the poncho over the canopy of the saddle (the plain black

saddle of a working cowboy, without a Barony brand or even a ranch brand to

mark it), and then mounted into the stirrup. She lifted her skirt and glanced around

sharply, sure he would be stealing a peek, but his back was still to her. He seemed

fast?ci?nat?ed with the rusty oil der?ricks.

What's so in?ter?est?ing about them, cul?ly? she thought, a tri?fle cross?ly— it was the

late?ness of the hour and the residue of her stirred-?up emo?tions, she sup?posed.

Filthy old things have been there six cen?turies and more, and I've been smelling

their stink my whole life.

“Stand easy now, my boy,” she said once she had her foot fixed in the stir?rup. One

hand held the top of the sad?dle's pom?mel, the oth?er the reins. Rush?er, mean?while,

flicked his ears as if to say he would stand easy all night, were that what she

re?quired.

She swung up, one long bare thigh flash?ing in the starlight, and felt the

ex?hil?ara?tion of be?ing horsed that she al?ways felt . . . on?ly tonight it seemed a lit?tle

stronger, a lit?tle sweet?er, a lit?tle sharp?er. Per?haps be?cause the horse was such a

beau?ty, per?haps be?cause the horse was a stranger . . .

Per?haps be?cause the horse's own?er is a stranger, she thought, and fair.

That was non?sense, of course . . . and po?ten?tial?ly dan?ger?ous non?sense. Yet it was

al?so true. He was fair.

As she opened the pon?cho and spread it over her legs, Dear?born be gan to whis?tle.

And she re?al?ized, with a mix?ture of sur?prise and su?per?sti?tious fear, what the tune

was: “Care?less Love.” The very lay she had been singing on her way up to Rhea's

hut.

May?hap it's ka, girl, her fa?ther's voice whis?pered.

No such thing, she thought right back at him. I'll not see ka in ev?ery pass?ing wind

and shad?ow, like the old ladies who gath?er in Green Heart of a sum?mer's evening.

It's an old tune: ev?ery?one knows it.

May?hap bet?ter if you're right. Pat Del?ga?do's voice re?turned. For if it's ka, it 'II

come like a wind, and your plans will stand be?fore it no more than my da's barn

stood be?fore the cy?clone when it came.

Not ka; she would not be se?duced by the dark and the shad?ows and the grim

shapes of the oil der?ricks in?to be?liev?ing it was. Not ka but on?ly a chance meet?ing

with a nice young man on the lone?ly road back to town.

"I've made my?self de?cent," she said in a dry voice that didn't sound much like her

own. "Ye may turn back if you like, Mr. Dear?born."

He did turn and gazed at her. For a mo?ment he said noth?ing, but she could see the

look in his eyes well enough to know that he found her fair as well. And al?though

this dis?qui?et?ed her—per?haps be?cause of what he'd been whistling—she was al?so

glad. Then he said, "You look well up there. You sit well."

"And I shall have hors?es of my own to sit be?fore long," she said. Now the

ques?tions will come, she thought.

But he on?ly nod?ded, as though he had known this about her al?ready, and be?gan to

walk to?ward town again. Feel?ing a lit?tle dis?ap?point?ed and not know?ing ex?act?ly

why, she clucked side?mouth at Rush?er and twitched her knees at him. He got

mov?ing, catch?ing up with his mas?ter, who gave Rush?er's muz?zle a com?pan?ion?able

lit?tle ca?ress.

"What do they call that place yon?der?" he asked, point?ing at the der?ricks.

"The oil patch? Cit?go."

"Some of the der?ricks still pump?"

"Aye, and no way to stop them. Not that any?one still knows."

"Oh," he said, and that was all—just oh. But he left his place by Rush?er's head for

a mo?ment when they came to the weedy track lead?ing in?to Cit?go, walk?ing across

to look at the old dis?used guard-?hut. In her child?hood there had been a sign on it

read?ing au?tho?rized per?son?nel on?ly, but it had blown away in some wind?storm or

oth?er. Will Dear?born had his look and then came am?bling back to the horse, boots

puff?ing up sum?mer dust, easy in his new clothes.

They went to?ward town, a young walk?ing man in a flat-?crowned hat, a young

rid?ing wom?an with a pon?cho spread over her lap and legs.
The star light rained
down on them as it has on young men and wom?en since time's
first hour, and once
she looked up and saw a me?te?or flash over?head—a brief and
bril?liant or?ange streak
across the vault of heav?en. Su?s?san thought to wish on it, and
then, with some?thing
like pan?ic, re?al?ized she had no idea what to wish for. None at
all.

4

She kept her own si?lence un?til they were a mile or so from
town, and then asked
the ques?tion which had been on her mind. She had planned to
ask hers af?ter he had
be?gun ask?ing his, and it irked her to be the one to break the
si?lence, but in the end
her cu?rios?ity was too much.

“Where do ye come from, Mr. Dear?born, and what brings ye to
our lit?tle bit o’ Mid-

World ... if ye don’t mind me ask?ing?”

“Not at all,” he said, look?ing up at her with a smile. “I’m glad
to talk and was on?ly

try?ing to think how to be?gin. Talk’s not a spe?cial?ty of mine.”
Then what is. Will

Dear?born? she won?dered. Yes, she won?dered very much, for
in ad?just?ing her

po?si?tion on the sad?dle, she had put her hand on the rolled
blan?ket be?hind . . . and

had touched some?thing hid?den in?side that blan?ket. Some?
thing that felt like a gun.

It didn’t have to be, of course, but she re?mem?bered the way
his hands had dropped

in?stinc?tive?ly to?ward his belt when she had cried out in sur?
prise.

”I come from the In-?World. I’ve an idea you prob?ably guessed
that much on your

own. We have our own way of talk?ing.”

”Aye. Which Barony is yer home, might I ask?”

”New Canaan.”

She felt a flash of re?al ex?cite?ment at that. New Canaan! Cen?
ter of the Af?fil?ia?tion!

That did not mean all it once had, of course, but still—

”Not Gilead?” she asked, de?test?ing the hint of a girl?ish gush
she heard in her voice.

And more than just a hint, mayhap.

"No," he said with a laugh. "Noth'ing so grand as Gilead. On'ly Hemphill, a vil'lage

forty or so wheels west of there. Small'er than Ham'bry, I wot."

Wheels, she thought, mar'vel'ling at the ar'chaism. He said wheels.

"And what brings ye to Ham'bry, then? May ye tell?"

"Why not? I've come with two of my friends, Mr. Richard Stock-worth of

Pen'nil'ton, New Canaan, and Mr. Arthur Heath, a hi'lar'ious young man who

ac'tu'al'ly does come from Gilead. We're here at the or'der of the Af'fil'ia'tion, and

have come as coun'ters."

"Coun'ters of what?"

"Coun'ters of any'thing and ev'ery'thing which may aid the Af'fil'ia'tion in the com'ing

years," he said, and she heard no light'ness in his voice now. "The busi'ness with

the Good Man has grown se'ri'ous."

"Has it? We hear lit'tle re'al news this far to the south and east of the hub."

He nod'ded. "The Barony's dis'tance from the hub is the chief rea'son we're here.

Mejis has been ev'er loy'al to the Af'fil'ia'tion, and if sup'plies need to be drawn from

this part of the Out'ers, they'll be sent. The ques tion that needs an'swer'ing is how

much the Af'fil'ia'tion can count on."

"How much of what?"

"Yes," he agreed, as if she'd made a state'ment in'stead of ask'ing a ques'tion. "And

how much of what."

"Ye speak as though the Good Man were a re'al threat. He's just a ban'dit, sure'ly,

frost'ing his thefts and mur'ders with talk of 'democ'ra'cy' and 'equal'ity'?"

Dear'born shrugged, and she thought for a mo'ment that would be his on'ly

com'ment on the mat'ter, but then he said, re'luc'tant'ly: " 'Twas once so, per'haps.

Times have changed. At some point the ban'dit be'came a gen'er'al, and now the

gen'er'al would be'come a ruler in the name of the peo'ple." He paused, then added

grave?ly, "The North?ern and West?rd Ba?ronies are in flames, la?dy."

"But those are thou?sands of miles away, sure?ly!" This talk was up?set ting, and yet

strange?ly ex?cit?ing, too. Most?ly it seemed ex?ot?ic, af?ter the pokey all-?days-?the-?same

world of Ham?bry, where some?one's dry well was good for three days of an?imat?ed

con?ver?sa?tion.

"Yes," he said. Not aye but yes—the sound was both strange and pleas?ing to her

ear. "But the wind is blow?ing in this di?rec?tion." He turned to her and smiled. Once

more it soft?ened his hard good looks, and made him seem no more than a child, up

too late af?ter his bed?time. "But I don't think we'll see John Far?son tonight, do

you?"

She smiled back. "If we did, Mr. Dear?born, would ye pro?tect me from him?"

"No doubt," he said, still smil?ing, "but I should do so with greater en thu?si?asm, I

wot, if you were to let me call you by the name your fa?ther gave you."

"Then, in the in?ter?ests of my own safe?ty, ye may do so. And I sup?pose I must call

ye Will, in those same in?ter?ests."

"'Tis both wise and pret?ti?ly put," he said, the smile be?com?ing a grin, wide and

en?gag?ing. "I—" Then, walk?ing as he was with his face turned back and up to her,

Su?sans new friend tripped over a rock jut?ting out of the road and al?most fell.

Rush?er whin?nied through his nose and reared a lit?tle. Su?sans laughed mer?ri?ly. The

pon?cho shift?ed, re?veal?ing one bare leg, and she took a mo?ment be?fore putting

mat?ters right again. She liked him, aye, so she did. And what harm could there be

in it? He was on?ly a boy, af?ter all. When he smiled, she could see he was on?ly a

year or two re moved from jump?ing in haystacks. (The thought that she had

re?cent?ly grad?uat?ed from haystack-?jump?ing her?self had some?how fled her mind.)

"I'm usu?al?ly not clum?s?sy," he said. "I hope I didn't star?t?le you."

Not at all. Will; boys have been stub?bing their toes around me ev?er since I grew my breasts.

"Not at all," she said, and re?turned to the pre?vi?ous top?ic. It in?ter?est?ed her great?ly.

"So ye and yer friends come at the be?hest of the Af?fil?ia?tion to count our goods, do you?"

"Yes. The rea?son I took par?tic?ular note of yon oil patch is be?cause one of us will

have to come back and count the work?ing der?ricks—"

"I can spare ye that, Will. There are nine?teen."

He nod?ded. "I'm in your debt. But we'll al?so need to make out—if we can—how

much oil those nine?teen pumps are bring?ing up."

"Are there so many oil?-fired ma?chines still work?ing in New Canaan that such news

mat?ters? And do ye have the alche?my to change the oil in?to the stuff yer ma?chines can use?"

"It's called re?fin?ery rather than alche?my in this case—at least I think so—and I

be?lieve there is one that still works. But no, we haven't that many ma?chines,

al?though there are still a few work?ing fil?ament-?lights in the Great Hall at Gilead."

"Fan?cy it!" she said, de?light?ed. She had seen pic?tures of fil?ament-?lights and

elec?tric flam?beaux, but nev?er the lights them?selves. The last ones in Ham?bry (they

had been called "spark-?lights" in this part of the world, but she felt sure they were

the same) had burned out two gen?era tions ago.

"You said your fa?ther man?aged the May?or's hors?es un?til his death," Will Dear?born

said. "Was his name Patrick Del?ga?do? It was, wasn't it?"

She looked down at him, bad?ly star?tled and brought back to re?al?ity in an in?stant.

"How do ye know that?"

"His name was in our lessons of call?ing. We're to count cat?tle, sheep, pigs, ox?en . .

. and hors?es. Of all your live?stock, hors?es are the most im por?tant. Patrick Del?ga?do

was the man we were to see in that regard. I'm sorry to hear he's come to the

clearing at the end of the path, Susan. Will you accept my condolence?"

"Aye, and with thanks."

"Was it an accident?"

"Aye." Hoping her voice said what she wanted it to say, which was leave this

subject, ask no more.

"Let me be honest with you," he said, and for the first time she thought she heard a

false note there. Perhaps it was only her imagination. Certainly she had little

experience of the world (Aunt Cord reminded her of this almost daily), but she had

an idea that people who set on by saying Let me be honest with you were apt to go

on by telling you straight-faced that rain fell up, money grew on trees, and babies

were brought by the Grand Feather.

"Aye, Will Dearborn," she said, her tone just the tiniest bit dry. "They say

honesty's the best policy, so they do."

He looked at her a bit doubtfully, and then his smile shone out again. That smile

was dangerous, she thought—a quicksand smile if ever there was one. Easy to

wander in; perhaps more difficult to wander back out.

"There's not much Affiliation in the Affiliation these days. That's part of the

reason Parsons's gone on as long as he has; that's what has allowed his ambitions

to grow. He's come a far way from the harrier who began as a stage-robber in

Garlan and Desoy, and he'll come farther yet if the Affiliation isn't revascularized.

Maybe all the way to Mejis."

She couldn't imagine what the Good Man could possibly want with her own sleepy

little town in the Barony which lay closest to the Clean Sea, but she kept silent.

"In any case, it wasn't really the Affiliation that sent us," he said. "Not all this way

to count cows and oil derricks and hectares of land under cultivation."

He paused a moment, looking down at the road (as if for more rocks in the way of

his boots) and stroking Rusher's nose with absent-minded gentleness. She thought

he was embarrassed, perhaps even 'shamed. "We were sent by our fathers."

"Yer—" Then she understood. Bad boys, they were, sent out on a make-work

quest that wasn't quite exile. She guessed their real job in Hambray might be to

rehabilitate their reputations. Well, she thought, it certainly explains the quicksand

smile, doesn't it? 'Ware this one, Susan; he's the sort to burn bridges and upset

mail-carts, then go on his merry way without a single look back. Not in meaness

but in plain old boy-carelessness.

That made her think of the old song again, the one she'd been singing, the one he'd

been whistling.

"Our fathers, yes."

Susan Delgado had cut a caper or two (or perhaps it was two dozen) other own in

her time, and she felt sympathy for Will Dearborn as well as caution. And interest.

Bad boys could be amusing ... up to a point. The question was, how bad had Will

and his cronies been?

"Helling?" she asked.

"Helling," he agreed, still sounding glum but perhaps brightening just a bit about

the eyes and mouth. "We were warned; yes, warned very well. There was ... a

certain amount of drinking."

And a few girls to squeeze with the hand not busy squeezing the ale-pot? It was a

question no nice girl could outright ask, but one that couldn't help occurring to her

mind.

Now the smile which had played briefly around the corners of his mouth dropped

away. "We pushed it too far and the fun stopped. Fools have a way of doing that.

One night there was a race. One moonless night. After midnight. All of us drunk.

One of the hors?es caught his hoof in a go?pher?hole and snapped a fore?leg. He had to be put down.“

Su?san winced. It wasn't the worst thing she could think of, but bad enough. And

when he opened his mouth again, it got worse.

”The horse was a thor?ough?bred, one of just three owned by my friend Richard's

fa?ther, who is not well?-to?-do. There were scenes in our house holds which I

haven't any de?sire to re?mem?ber, let alone talk about. I'll make a long sto?ry short

and say that, af?ter much talk and many pro?pos?als for pun?ish?ment, we were sent

here, on this er?rand. It was Arthur's fa?ther's idea. I think Arthur's da has al?ways

been a bit ap?palled by Arthur. Cer tain?ly Arthur's ruc?tions didn't come from

George Heath's side.“

Su?san smiled to her?self, think?ing of Aunt Cordelia say?ing, ”She cer tain?ly doesn't

get it from our side of the fam?ily.“ Then the cal?cu?lated pause, fol?lowed by: ”She

had a great?aunt on her moth?er's side who ran crazy . . . you didn't know? Yes! Set

her?self on fire and threw her?self over the Drop. In the year of the comet, it was.“

”Any?way,“ Will re?sumed, ”Mr. Heath set us on with a say?ing from his own

fa?ther—’One should med?itate in pur?ga?to?ry.’ And here we are.“

”Ham?bry's far from pur?ga?to?ry.“

He sketched his fun?ny lit?tle how again. ”If it were, all should want to be bad

enough to come here and meet the pret?ty denizens.“

”Work on that one a bit,“ she said in her dri?est voice. ”It's still rough, I fear.

Per?haps—“

She fell silent as a dis?may?ing re?al?iza?tion oc?curred to her: she was go ing to have to

hope this boy would en?ter in?to a lim?it?ed con?spir?acy with her. Oth?er?wise, she was

apt to be em?bar?rassed.

”Su?san?“

”I was just think?ing. Are you here yet, Will? Of?fi?cial?ly, I

mean?"

"No," he said, taking her meaning at once. And likely already seeing where this

was going. He seemed sharp enough, in his way. "We only arrived in Barony this

afternoon, and you're the first person any of us has spoken to ... unless, that is,

Richard and Arthur have met folks. I couldn't sleep, and so came out to ride and to

think things over a little. We're camped over there." He pointed to the right. "On

that long slope that runs toward the sea."

"Aye, the Drop, it's called." She realized that Will and his mates might even be

camped on what would be her own land by law before much more time had

passed. The thought was amusing and exciting and a little startling.

"Tomorrow we ride into town and present our commitments to My Lord Mayor,

Hart Thorin. He's a bit of a fool, according to what we were told before leaving

New Canaan."

"Were ye indeed told so?" she asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes—apt to blabber, fond of strong drink, even more fond of young girls," Will

said. "Is it true, would you say?"

"I think ye must judge for yourself," said she, stifling a smile with some effort.

"In any case, we'll also be presenting to the Honorable Kimba Rimer, Thorin's

Chancellor, and I understand he knows his beans. And counts his beans, as well."

"Thorin will have ye to dinner at Mayor's House," Susan said. "Perhaps not

tomorrow night, but surely the night after."

"A dinner of state in Hamby," Will said, smiling and still stroking Rusher's nose.

"Gods, how shall I bear the agony of my anticipation?"

"Never mind your nettle-some mouth," she said, "but only listen, if ye'd be my friend.

This is important."

His smile dropped away, and she saw again—as she had for a moment or two

before—the man he'd be before too many more years had

passed. The hard face,

the con?cen?trat?ed eyes, the mer?ci?less mouth. It was a fright?en?ing face, in a way—a

fright?en?ing prospect—and yet, still, the place the old hag had touched felt warm

and she found it dif?fi?cult to take her eyes off him. What, she won?dered, was his

hair like un?der that stupid hat he wore?

“Tell me, Su?san.”

“If you and yer friends come to ta?ble at Thorin’s, ye may see me. If ye see me,

Will, see me for the first time. See Miss Del?ga?do, as I shall see Mr. Dear?born.

Do’ee take my mean?ing?”

“To the let?ter.” He was look?ing at her thought?ful?ly. “Do you serve? Surely, if your

fa?ther was the Barony’s chief drover, you do not—”

“Nev?er mind what I do or don’t do. Just promise that if we meet at Seafront, we

meet for the first time.”

“I promise. But—”

“No more ques?tions. We’ve near?ly come to the place where we must part ways,

and I want to give ye a warn?ing—fair pay?ment for the ride on this nice mount of

yours, may?hap. If ye dine with Thorin and Rimer, ye’ll not be the on?ly new folk at

his ta?ble. There’ll like?ly be three oth?ers, men Thorin has hired to serve as pri?vate

guards o’ the house.”

“Not as Sher?iff’s deputies?”

“Nay, they an?swer to none but Thorin ... or, may?hap, to Rimer. Their names are

Jonas, De?pape, and Reynolds. They look like hard boys to me ... al?though Jonas’s

boy?hood is so long be?hind him that I imag?ine he’s for?got he ev?er had one.”

“Jonas is the lead?er?”

“Aye. He limps, has hair that falls to his shoul?ders pret?ty as any girl’s, and the

qua?very voice of an old gaffer who spends his days pol?ish?ing the chim?ney-

com?er... but I think he’s the most dan?ger?ous of the three all the same. I’d guess

these three have for?got more about helling than you and yer

friends will ever
learn."

Now why had she told him all that? She didn't know, exactly.
Gratitude, perhaps.

He had promised to keep the secret of this late-night meeting, and he had the look

of a promise-keeper, in hack with his father or not.

"I'll watch them. And I thank you for the advice." They were
now climbing a long,

gentle slope. Overhead, Old Mother blazed relentlessly.
"Bodyguards," he mused.

"Bodyguards in sleepy little Hamby. It's strange times, Susan. Strange indeed."

"Aye." She had wondered about Jonas, Depape, and Reynolds
her self, and could

think of no good reason for them to be in town. Had they been
Rimer's doing.

Rimer's decision? It seemed likely—Thorin wasn't the sort of
man to even think

about bodyguards, she would have said; the High Sheriff had
always done well

enough for him—but still... why?

They breasted the hill. Below them lay a nestle of buildings
—the village of

Hamby. Only a few lights still shone. The brightest cluster
marked the Travellers'

Rest. From here, on the warm breeze, she could hear the piano
beatting out "Hey

Jude" and a score of drunken voices gleefully murdering
the chorus. Not the three

men of whom she had warned Will Dearborn, though; they
would be standing at

the bar, watching the room with their flat eyes. Not the singing
type were those

three. Each had a small blue coffin-shaped tattooed on his
right hand, burned into

the webbing between thumb and forefinger. She thought to
tell Will this, then

realized he'd see for himself soon enough. Instead, she
pointed a little way down

the slope, at a dark shape which overhung the road on a chain.
"Do ye see that?"

"Yes." He heaved a large and rather comical sigh. "Is it the object
I fear beyond all

others? Is it the dread shape of Mrs. Beech's mailbox?"

"Aye. And it's there we must part."

"If you say we must, we must. Yet I wish—" Just then the wind shifted, as it

sometimes did in the summer, and blew a strong gust out of the west. The smell of

sea-salt was gone in an instant, and so was the sound of the drunken, singing

voices. What replaced them was a sound infinitely more sinister, one that never

failed to produce a scutter of gooseflesh up her back: a low, atonal noise, like the

warble of a siren being turned by a man without much longer to live.

Will took a step backward, eyes widening, and again she noticed his hands take a

dip toward his belt, as if reaching for something not there.

"What in gods' name is that?"

"It's a thinny," she said quietly. "In Eyebolt Canyon. Have you ever heard of such?"

"Heard of, yes, but never heard until now. Gods, how do you stand it? It sounds alive!"

She had never thought of it quite like that, but now, in a way listening with his

ears instead of her own, she thought he was right. It was as if some sick part of the

night had gained a voice and was actually trying to sing.

She shivered. Rusher felt the momentary increased pressure of her knees and

whickered softly, craning his head around to look at her.

"We don't often hear it so clearly at this time of year," she said. "In the fall, the

men bum it to quiet."

"I don't understand."

Who did? Who understood anything anymore? Gods, they couldn't even turn off

the few oil-pumps in Citgo that still worked, although half of them squealed like

pigs in a slaughterhouse chute. These days you were usually just grateful to find

things that still worked at all.

"In the summer, when there's time, drovers and cowboys drag loads of brush to the

mouth of Eyebolt," she said. "Dead brush is all right, but live is

bet?ter, for it's

smoke that's want?ed, and the heav?ier the bet?ter. Eye-bolt's a box canyon, very

short and steep-walled. Al?most like a chim?ney ly?ing on its side, you see?"

"Yes."

"The tra?di?tion?al time for burn?ing is Reap Mom—the day af?ter the fair and the feast and the fire."

"The first day of win?ter."

"Aye al?though in these parts it doesn't feel like win?ter so soon. In any case it's no

tra?di?tion; the brush is some?times lit soon?er, if the winds have been prank?ish or if

the sound's par?tic?ular?ly strong. It up?sets the live stock, you know—cows give

poor?ly when the noise of the thin?ny's strong—and it makes sleep dif?fi?cult."

"I should think it would." Will was still look?ing north, and a stronger gust of wind

blew his hat off. It fell to his back, the rawhide tugstring pulling against the line of

his throat. The hair so re?vealed was a lit?tle long, and as black as a crow's wing.

She felt a sud?den, greedy de?sire to run her hands through it, to let her fin?gers tell

its tex?ture—rough or smooth or silky? And how would it smell? At this she felt

an?oth?er shiv?er of heat down low in her bel?ly. He turned to her as though he had

read her mind, and she flushed, grate?ful that he wouldn't be able to see the

dark?en?ing of her cheek.

"How long has it been there?"

"Since be?fore I was born," she said, "but not be?fore my da was born. He said that

the ground shook in an earth?quake just be?fore it came. Some say the earth?quake

brought it, some say that's su?per?sti?tious non?sense. All I know is that it's al?ways

been there. The smoke qui?ets it awhile, the way it will qui?et a hive of bees or

wasps, but the sound al?ways comes back. The brush piled at the mouth helps to

keep any wan?der?ing live?stock out, too—some?times they're

drawn to it, gods know

why. But if a cow or sheep does hap?pen to yet in—af?ter the burn?ing and be?fore the

next year's pile has start?ed to grow, may?hap—it doesn't come back out. What?ev?er

it is, it's hun?gry."

She put his pon?cho aside, lift?ed her right leg over the sad?dle with?out so much as

touch?ing the horn, and slipped off Rush?er—all this in a sin?gle liq?uid move?ment. It

was a stunt made for pants rather than a dress, and she knew from the fur?ther

widen?ing of his eyes that he'd seen a good lot of her . . . but noth?ing she had to

wash with the bath?room door closed, so what of that? And that quick dis?mount

had ev?er been a fa?vorite trick of hers when she was in a showoffy mood.

"Pret?ty!" he ex?claimed.

"I learned it from my da," she said, re?spond?ing to the more in?no?cent in?ter?pre?ta?tion

of his com?pli?ment. Her smile as she hand?ed him the reins, how?ev?er, sug?gest?ed that

she was will?ing to ac?cept the com?pli?ment any way it was meant.

"Su?san? Have you ev?er seen the thin?ny?"

"Aye, once or twice. From above."

"What does it look like?"

"Ug?ly," she re?spond?ed at once. Un?til tonight, when she had ob?served Rhea's smile

up close and en?dured her twid?dling, med?dling fin?gers, she would have said it was

the ugly?est thing she had ev?er seen. "It looks a lit tle like a slow-?burn?ing peat fire,

and a lit?tle like a swamp full of scum?my green wa?ter. There's a mist that ris?es off

it. Some?times it looks like long, skin?ny arms. With hands at the end of em."

"Is it grow?ing?"

"Aye, they say it is, that ev?ery thin?ny grows, but it grows slow?ly. 'Twon't es?cape

Eye?bolt Canyon in your time or mine."

She looked up at the sky, and saw that the con?stel?la?tions had con?tin ued to tilt

along their tracks as they spoke. She felt she could talk to him

all night—about the

thin?ny, or Cit?go, or her ir?ri?tat?ing aunt, or just about any? thing—and the idea

dis?mayed her. Why should this hap?pen to her now, for the gods' sake? Af?ter three

years of dis?miss?ing the Ham?bry boys, why should she now meet a boy who

in?ter?est?ed her so strange?ly? Why was life so un?fair?

Her ear?li?er thought, the one she'd heard in her fa?ther's voice, re?curred to her: If it's

ka, it'll come like a wind, and your plans will stand be?fore it no more than a barn

be?fore a cy?clone.

But no. And no. And no. So set she, with all her con?sid?er?able de?ter?mi na?tion, her

mind against the idea. This was no bam; this was her life.

Su?san reached out and touched the rusty tin of Mrs. Beech's mail?box, as if to

steady her?self in the world. Her lit?tle hopes and day?dreams didn't mean so much,

per?haps, but her fa?ther had taught her to mea?sure her?self by her abil?ity to do the

things she'd said she would do, and she would not over?throw his teach?ings sim?ply

be?cause she hap?pened to en?counter a good-?look?ing boy at a time when her body

and her emo?tions were in a stew.

"I'll leave ye here to ei?ther re?join yer friends or re?sume yer ride," she said. The

grav?ity she heard in her voice made her feel a bit sad, for it was an adult grav?ity.

"But re?mem?ber yer promise, Will—if ye see me at Seafront—May?or's

House—and if ye'd be my friend, see me there for the first time. As I'd see you."

He nod?ded, and she saw her se?ri?ous?ness now mir?rored in his own face. And the

sad?ness, may?hap. "I've nev?er asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she'd ac?cept a

vis?it of me. I'd ask of you, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick—I'd even bring you flow?ers

to sweet?en my chances—but it would do no good, I think."

She shook her head. "Nay. Twouldn't."

"Are you promised in mar?riage? It's for?ward of me to ask, I know, but I mean no

harm."

"I'm sure ye don't, but I'd as soon not an?swer. My po?si?tion is a deli cate one just

now, as I told ye. Be?sides, it's late. Here's where we part, Will. But stay . . . one more mo?ment . . ."

She rum?maged in the pock?et of her apron and brought out half a cake wrapped in a

piece of green leaf. The oth?er half she had eat?en on her way up to the Coos ... in

what now felt like the oth?er half of her life. She held what was left of her lit?tle

evening meal out to Rush?er, who sniffed it, then ate it and nuz?zled her hand. She

smiled, lik?ing the vel?vet tick?le in the cup of her palm. "Aye, thee's a good horse, so ye are."

She looked at Will Dear?born, who stood in the road, shuf?fling his dusty boots and

gaz?ing at her un?hap?pi?ly. The hard look was gone from his face, now; he looked

her age again, or younger. "We were well met, weren't we?" he asked.

She stepped for?ward, and be?fore she could let her?self think about what she was

do?ing, she put her hands on his shoul?ders, stood on her toes, and kissed him on the

mouth. The kiss was brief but not sis?ter?ly.

"Aye, very well met. Will." But when he moved to?ward her (as thought?less?ly as a

flow?er turn?ing its face to fol?low the sun), wish?ing to re peat the ex?pe?ri?ence, she

pushed him back a step, gen?tly but firm?ly.

"Nay, that was on?ly a thank?-you, and one thank?-you should be enough for a

gen?tle?man. Go yer course in peace, Will."

He took up the reins like a man in a dream, looked at them for a mo ment as if he

didn't know what in the world they were, and then looked hack at her. She could

see him work?ing to clear his mind and emo?tions of the im? pact her kiss had made.

She liked him for it. And she was very glad she had done it.

"And you yours," he said, swing?ing in?to the sad?dle. "I look for?ward to meet?ing

you for the first time."

He smiled at her, and she saw both longing and wishes in that smile. Then he

giggled the horse, turned him, and started back the way they'd come—to have

another look at the oil patch, maybe. She stood where she was, by Mrs. Beech's

mailbox, willing him to turn around and wave so she could see his face once more.

She felt sure he would . . . but he didn't. Then, just as she was about to turn away

and start down the hill to town, he did turn, and his hand lifted, fluttering for a

moment in the dark like a moth.

Susan lifted her own in return and then went her way, feeling happy and unhappy

at the same time. Yet—and this was perhaps the most important thing—she no

longer felt soiled. When she had touched the boy's lips, Rhea's touch seemed to

have left her skin. A small magic, perhaps, but she welcomed it.

She walked on, smiling a little and looking up at the stars more frequently than

was her habit when out after dark.

CHAPTER IV

LONG AFTER MOONSET

1

He rode restlessly for nearly two hours back and forth along what she called the

Drop, never pushing Rusher above a trot, although what he wanted to do was

gallop the big gelding under the stars until his own blood began to cool a little.

It'll cool plenty if you draw attention to yourself, he thought, and likely you won't

even have to cool it yourself. Fools are the only folk on the earth who can

absolutely count on getting what they deserve. That old saying made him think of

the scarred and bowlegged man who had been his life's greatest teacher, and he

smiled.

At last he turned his horse down the slope to the trickle of brook which ran there,

and fol?lowed it a mile and a half up?stream (past sev?er?al
gath?ers of horse; they

looked at Rush?er with a kind of sleepy, wall-?eyed sur?prise) to
a grove of wil?lows.

From the hol?low with?in, a horse whick ered soft?ly. Rush?er
whick?ered in re?turn,

stamp?ing one hoof and nod?ding his head up and down.

His rid?er ducked his own head as he passed through the wil?
low fronds, and

sud?den?ly there was a nar?row and in?hu?man white face
hang?ing be?fore him, its

up?per half all but swal?lowed by black, pupil?less eyes.

He dipped for his guns—the third time tonight he'd done that,
and for the third

time there was noth?ing there. Not that it mat?tered; al?ready
he rec og?nized what

was hang?ing be?fore him on a string: that id?iot?ic rook's skull.

The young man who was cur?rent?ly call?ing him?self Arthur
Heath had tak?en it off

his sad?dle (it amused him to call the skull so perched their
look?out, “ug?ly as an old

gam?mer, but per?fect cheap to feed”) and hung it here as a
prank greet?ing. Him and

his jokes! Rush?er's mas?ter bat?ted it aside hard enough to
break the string and send

the skull fly?ing in?to the dark.

“Fie, Roland,” said a voice from the shad?ows. It was re?proach?
ful, but there was

laugh?ter bub?bling just be?neath ... as there al?ways was.
Cuth?bert was his old?est

friend—the marks of their first teeth had been em?bed ded on
many of the same

toys—but Roland had in some ways nev?er un?der?stood him.
Nor was it just his

laugh?ter; on the long-?ago day when Hax, the palace cook, was
to be hung for a

traitor on Gal?lows Hill, Cuth?bert had been in an agony of ter?
ror and re?morse. He'd

told Roland he couldn't stay, couldn't watch . . . but in the end
he had done both.

Be cause nei?ther the stupid jokes nor the easy sur?face emo?
tions were the truth of

Cuth?bert All?go?od.

As Roland en?tered the hol?low at the cen?ter of the grove, a
dark shape stepped out

from be?hind the tree where it had been keep?ing. Halfway across the clear?ing, it

re?solved it?self in?to a tall, nar?row-?hipped boy who was bare?foot?ed be?low his jeans

and bare-?chest?ed above them. In one hand he held an enor?mous an?tique

re?volver—a kind which was some?times called a beer-?bar?rel be?cause of the

cylin?der's size.

"Fie," Cuth?bert re?peat?ed, as if he liked the sound of this word, not ar cha?ic on?ly in

for?got?ten back?wa?ters like Mejis. "That's a fine way to treat the guard o' the watch,

smack?ing the poor thin-?faced fel?low halfway to the near?est moun?tain-?range!"

"If I'd been wear?ing a gun, I like?ly would have blown it to smith ereens and wo?ken

half the coun?try?side."

"I knew you wouldn't be go?ing about strapped," Cuth?bert an?swered mild?ly.

"You're re?mark?ably ill-?look?ing, Roland son of Steven, but no body's fool even as

you ap?proach the an?cient age of fif?teen."

"I thought we agreed we'd use the names we're trav?el?ling un?der. Even among

our?selves."

Cuth?bert stuck out his leg, bare heel plant?ed in the turf, and bowed with his arms

out?stretched and his hands stren?uous?ly bent at the wrist—an in?spired im?ita?tion of

the sort of man for whom court has be?come ca?reer. He al?so looked re?mark?ably like

a heron stand?ing in a marsh, and Roland snort?ed laugh?ter in spite of him?self. Then

he touched the in?side of his left wrist to his fore?head, to see if he had a fever. He

felt fever?ish enough in side his head, gods knew, but the skin above his eyes felt

cool.

"I cry your par?don, gun?slinger," Cuth?bert said, his eyes and hands still turned

humbly down.

The smile on Roland's face died. "And don't call me that again, Cuth bert. Please.

Not here, not any?where. Not if you val?ue me."

Cuthbert dropped his pose at once and came quickly to where Roland sat his

horse. He looked honestly humbled.

"Roland—Will—I'm sorry."

Roland clapped him on the shoulder. "No harm done. Just remember from here on

out. Mejis may be at the end of the world . . . but it still is the world. Where's

Alain?"

"Dick, do you mean? Where do you think?" Cuthbert pointed across the clearing,

to where a dark hulk was either snoring or slowly choking to death.

"That one," Cuthbert said, "would sleep through an earthquake."

"But you heard me coming and woke."

"Yes," Cuthbert said. His eyes were on Roland's face, searching it with an

intensity that made Roland feel a little uneasy. "Did something happen to you?

You look different."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Excited. Aired out, somehow."

If he was going to tell Cuthbert about Susan, now was the time. He decided

without really thinking about it (most of his decisions, certainly the best of them,

were made in this same way) not to tell. If he met her at Mayor's House, it would

be the first time as far as Cuthbert and Alain knew, as well. What harm in that?

"I've been properly aired, all right," he said, dismounting and bending to uncinch

the girths of his saddle. "I've seen some interesting things, too."

"Ah? Speak, companion of my boss's dearest tenant."

"I'll wait until tomorrow, I think, when your helper's bear is finally awake. Then

I only have to tell once. Besides, I'm tired. I'll share you one thing, though: there

are too many horses in these parts, even for a Barony renowned for its horseflesh.

Too many by far."

Before Cuthbert could ask any questions, Roland pulled the saddle from Rusher's

back and set it down be?side three small wick?er cages which had been bound

to?geth?er with rawhide, mak?ing them in?to a car?ri?er which could be se?cured to a

horse's back. In?side, three pi?geons with white rings around their necks cooed

sleep?ily. One took his head out from be neath his wing, had a peek at Roland, and

then tucked him?self away again.

"These fel?lows all right?" Roland asked.

"Fine. Peck?ing and shit?ting hap?pi?ly in their straw. As far as they're con?cerned,

they're on va?ca?tion. What did you mean about—"

"To?mor?row," Roland said, and Cuth?bert, see?ing that there would be no more, on?ly

nod?ded and went to find his lean and bony look?out.

Twen?ty min?utes lat?er, Rush?er un?load?ed and rubbed down and set to for?age with

Buck?skin and Glue Boy (Cuth?bert could not even name his horse as a nor?mal

per?son would), Roland lay on his back in his bedroll, look?ing up at the late stars

over?head. Cuth?bert had gone back to sleep as eas?ily as he had awak?ened at the

sound of Rush?er's hoofs, but Roland had nev?er felt less sleepy in his life.

His mind turned back a month, to the whore's room, to his fa?ther sit ting on the

whore's bed and watch?ing him dress. The words his fa?ther had spo?ken—I have

known for two years—had re?ver?ber?at?ed like a struck gong in Roland's head. He

sus?pect?ed they might con?tin?ue to do so for the rest of his life.

But his fa?ther had had much more to say. About Marten. About Roland's moth?er,

who was, per?haps, more sinned against than sin?ning. About har?ri?ers who called

them?selves pa?tri?ots. And about John Far?son, who had in?deed been in Cres?sia, and

who was gone from that place now—van?ished, as he had a way of do?ing, like

smoke in a high wind. Be fore leav?ing, he and his men had burned In?drie, the

Barony seat, pret?ty much to the ground. The slaugh?ter had

been in the hun?dreds,

and per?haps it was no sur?prise that Cres?sia had since re?pu?di?at?ed the Af?fil?ia?tion and

spo?ken for the Good Man. The Barony Gov?er?nor, the May?or of In?drie, and the

High Sher?iff had all end?ed the ear?ly sum?mer day which con?clud?ed Far?son's vis?it

with their heads on the wall guard?ing the town's en?trance. That was, Steven

De?schain had said, "pret?ty per?sua?sive pol?itics."

It was a game of Cas?tles where both armies had come out from be hind their

Hillocks and the fi?nal moves had com?menced, Roland's fa?ther had said, and as was

so of?ten the case with pop?ular rev?olu?tions, that game was apt to be over be?fore

many in the Ba?ronies of Mid-?World had be?gun to re?al?ize that John Far?son was a

se?ri?ous threat... or, if you were one of those who be?lieved pas?sion?ate?ly in his

vi?sion of democ?ra?cy and an end to what he called "class slav?ery and an?cient fairy-

tales," a se?ri?ous agent of change.

His fa?ther and his fa?ther's small ka-?tet of gun?slingers, Roland was amazed to learn,

cared lit?tle about Far?son in ei?ther light; they looked up?on him as small cheese.

Looked up?on the Af?fil?ia?tion it?self as small cheese; come to that.

I'm go?ing to send you away, Steven had said, sit?ting there on the bed and look?ing

somber?ly at his on?ly son. the one who had lived. There is no true safe place left in

Mid- World, hut the Barony of Mejis on the Clean Sea is as close to true safe?ty as

any place may be these days . . . so it's there you'll go, along with at least two of

your mates. Alain, I sup?pose, for one. Just not that laugh?ing boy for the oth?er, I

beg of you. You 'd be bet?ter off with a bark?ing dog.

Roland, who on any oth?er day in his life would have been over?joyed at the

prospect of see?ing some of the wider world, had protest?ed hot?ly. If the fi?nal bat?tles

against the Good Man were at hand, he want?ed to fight them at

his fa?ther's side.

He was a gun?slinger now, af?ter all, if on?ly a 'pren?tice, and—
His fa?ther had shak?en his head, slow?ly and em?phat?ical?ly.

No, Roland. You don't

un?der?stand. You shall, how?ev?er; as well as pos?si?ble, you shall.

Lat?er, the two of them had walked the high bat?tle?ments above Mid-?World's last

liv?ing city—green and gor?geous Gilead in the morn?ing sun, with its pen?nons

flap?ping and the ven?dors in the streets of the Old Quar?ter and hors?es trot?ting on

the bri?dle paths which ra?di?at?ed out from the palace stand?ing at the heart of

ev?ery?thing. His fa?ther had told him more (not ev?ery?thing), and he had un?der?stood

more (far from ev?ery?thing—nor did his fa?ther un?der?stand ev?ery?thing). The Dark

Tow?er had not been men tioned by ei?ther of them, but al?ready it hung in Roland's

mind, a pos?si bil?ity like a storm cloud far away on the hori?zon.

Was the Tow?er what all of this was re?al?ly about? Not a jumped-?up har?ri?er with

dreams of rul?ing Mid-?World, not the wiz?ard who had en chant?ed his moth?er, not

the glass ball which Steven and his posse had hoped to find in Cres?sia . . . but the

Dark Tow?er?

He hadn't asked.

He hadn't dared ask.

Now he shift?ed in his bedroll and closed his eyes. He saw the girl's face at once;

he felt her lips pressed firm?ly against his own again, and smelled the scent of her

skin. He was in?stant?ly hot from the top of his head to the base of his spine, cold

from the base of his spine to the tips of his toes. Then he thought of the way her

legs had flashed as she slid from Rush?er's back (al?so the glim?mer of the

un?der?gar?ments be?neath her briefly raised dress), and his hot half and cold half

changed places.

The whore had tak?en his vir?gin?ity but wouldn't kiss him; had

turned her face aside

when he tried to kiss her. She'd allowed him to do whatever else he wanted, but

not that. At the time he'd been bitterly disappointed. Now he was glad.

The eye of his adolescent mind, both restless and clear, considered (he braided which

fell down her back to her waist, the soft dimples which had formed at the corners

of her mouth when she smiled, the lilt of her voice, her old-fashioned way of

saying aye and nay, ye and yer and da. He thought of how her hands had felt on

his shoulders as she stretched up to kiss him, and thought he would give

everything he owned to feel her hands there again, so light and so firm. And her

mouth on his. It was a mouth that knew only a little about kissing, he guessed, but

that was a little more than he knew himself.

Be careful, Roland—don't let your feeling for this girl tip anything over. She's not

free, anyway—she said as much. Not married, but spoken for in some other way.

Roland was far from the relentless creature he would eventually become, but the

seeds of that relentlessness were there—small, stony things that would, in their

time, grow into trees with deep roots . . . and bitter fruit. Now one of these seeds

cracked open and sent up its first sharp blade.

What's been spoken for may be unspoken, and what's done may be undone.

Nothing's sure, but . . . I want her.

Yes. That was the one thing he did know, and he knew it as well as he knew the

face of his father: he wanted her. Not as he had wanted the whore when she lay

naked on her bed with her legs spread and her half-lidded eyes looking up at him,

but in the way he wanted food when he was hungry or water when he was thirsty.

In the way, he supposed, that he wanted to drag Marten's dusty body behind his

horse down Gilead's High Road in payment for what the wiz-

ard had done to his
moth?er.

He want?ed her; he want?ed the girl Su?san.

Roland turned over on his oth?er side, closed his eyes, and fell
asleep. His rest was

thin and lit by the crude?ly po?et?ic dreams on?ly ado?les?cent
boys have, dreams where

sex?ual at?trac?tion and ro?man?tic love come to geth?er and
res?onate more pow?er?ful?ly

than they ev?er will again. In these thirsty vi?sions Su?san Del?
ga?do put her hands on

Roland's shoul?ders over and over, kissed his mouth over and
over, told him over

and over to come to her for the first time, to be with her for the
first time, to see

her for the first time, to see her very well.

2

Five miles or so from where Roland slept and dreamed his
dreams, Su?san Del?ga?do

lay in her bed and looked out her win?dow and watched Old
Star be?gin to grow

pale with the ap?proach?ing dawn. Sleep was no clos?er now
than it had been when

she lay down, and there was a throb be?tween her legs where
the old wom?an had

touched her. It was dis?tract?ing but no longer un?pleas?ant,
be?cause she now

as?so?ci?at?ed it with the boy she'd met on the road and im?
pul?sive?ly kissed by

starlight. Ev?ery time she shift?ed her legs, that throb flared in?
to a brief sweet ache.

When she'd got home, Aunt Cord (who would have been in her
own bed an hour

be?fore on any or?di?nary night) had been sit?ting in her rock?
ing chair by the

fire?place—dead and cold and swept clean of ash?es at this time
of year—with a

lap?ful of lace that looked like wave-?froth against her dowdy
black dress. She was

edg?ing it with a speed that seemed al?most su?per?nat?ural to
Su?san, and she hadn't

looked up when the door opened and her niece came in on a
swirl of breeze.

"I ex?pect?ed ye an hour ago," Aunt Cord said. And then, al?
though she didn't sound

it: "I was wor?ried."

"Aye?" Su?san said, and said no more. She thought that on any oth?er night she

would have of?fered one of her fum?bling ex?cus?es which al?ways sound?ed like a lie

to her own ears—it was the ef?fect Aunt Cord had had on her all her life—but this

hadn't been an or?di?nary night. Nev?er in her life had there been a night like this.

She found she could not get Will Dear?born out of her mind.

Aunt Cord had looked up then, her close-?set, rather beady eyes sharp and

in?quis?itive above her nar?row blade of a nose. Some things hadn't changed since

Su?san had set out for the Coos; she had still been able to feel her aunt's eyes

brush?ing across her face and down her body, like lit?tle whisk-?brooms with sharp

bris?tles.

"What took ye so long?" Aunt Cord had asked. "Was there trou?ble?"

"No trou?ble," Su?san had replied, but for a mo?ment she thought of how the witch

had stood be?side her in the door?way, pulling her braid through the gnarled tube of

one loose?ly clenched fist. She re?mem?bered want?ing to go, and she re?mem?bered

ask?ing Rhea if their busi?ness was done.

May?hap there's one more lit?tle thing, the old wom?an had said ... or so Su?san

thought. But what had that one more lit?tle thing been? She couldn't re?mem?ber.

And, re?al?ly, what did it mat?ter? She was shut of Rhea un?til her bel?ly be?gan to rise

with Thorin's child . . . and if there could be no ba?by-?mak?ing un?til Reap-?Night,

she'd not be re?turn?ing to the Coos un til late win?ter at the soon?est. An age! And it

would be longer than that, were she slow to kin?dle . . .

"I walked slow?ly com?ing home, Aunt. That's all."

"Then why look ye so?" Aunt Cord had asked, scant brows knit?ting to?ward the

ver?ti?cal line which creased her brow.

"How so?" Su?san had asked, tak?ing off her apron and knot?ting the strings and

hang?ing in the hook just in?side the kitchen door.

“Flushy. Frothy. Like milk fresh out of the cow.”

She’d al?most laughed. Aunt Cord, who knew as lit?tle about men as Su?san did

about the stars and plan?ets, had struck it di?rect?ly. Flushy and frothy was ex?act?ly

how she felt. “On?ly the night air, I sup?pose,” she had said. “I saw a me?te?or, Aunt.

And heard the thin?ny. The sound’s strong tonight.”

“Aye?” her aunt asked with?out in?ter?est, then re?turned to the sub?ject which did

in?ter?est her. “Did it hurt?”

“A lit?tle.”

“Did ye cry?”

Su?san shook her head.

“Good. Bet?ter not. Al?ways bet?ter. She likes it when they cry, I’ve heard. Now,

Sue—did she give you some?thing? Did the old pussy give you some?thing?”

“Aye.” She reached in?to her pock?et and brought out the pa?per with

writ?ten up?on it. She held it out and her aunt snatched it away with a greedy look.

Cordelia had been quite the sug?arplum over the last month or so, but now that she

had what she want?ed (and now that Su?san had come too far and promised too

much to have a change of heart), she’d re?vert?ed to the sour, su?per?cil?ious, of?ten

sus?pi?cious wom?an Su?san had grown up with; the one who’d been driv?en in?to

al?most week?ly bouts of rage by her phleg?mat?ic, life-?goes-?as-’twill broth?er. In a

way, it was a re?lief. It had been nervewrack?ing to have Aunt Cord play?ing Cy?bil?la

Good-?Sprite day af?ter day.

“Aye, aye, there’s her mark, all right,” her aunt had said, trac?ing her fin?gers over

the bot?tom of the sheet. “A dev?il’s hoof’s what it means, some say, but what do we

care, eh. Sue? Nasty, hor?rid crea?ture that she is, she’s still made it pos?si?ble for two

wom?en to get on in the world a lit?tle longer. And ye’ll on?ly have to see her once

more, prob?ably around Year’s End, when ye’ve caught prop?

er."

"It will be lat'er than that," Su?san had told her. "I'm not to lie with him un?til the full

of the De?mon Moon. Af?ter the Reap?ing Fair and the bon? fire."

Aunt Cord had stared, eyes wide, mouth open. "Said she so?"

Are you call?ing me a liar. Aun?tie? she had thought with a sharp?ness that wasn't

much like her; usu?al?ly her na?ture was more like her fa?ther's.

"Aye."

"But why? Why so long?" Aunt Cord was ob?vi?ous?ly up?set, ob?vi?ous?ly

dis?ap?point?ed. There had so far been eight pieces of sil?ver and four of gold out of

this; they were tucked up wher?ev?er it was that Aunt Cord squir?reled her mon?ey

away (and Su?san sus?pect?ed there was a fair amount of it, al though Cordelia liked

to plead pover?ty at ev?ery op?por?tu?ni?ty), and twice that much was still owed ... or

would be, once the blood?stained sheet went to the May?or's House laun?dress. That

same amount would be paid yet again when Rhea had con? firmed the ba?by, and the

ba?by's hon?esty. A lot of mon?ey, all told. A great lot, for a lit? tle place like this and

lit?tle folk like them. And now, to have the pay?ing of it put back so far . . .

Then came a sin Su?san had prayed over (al?though with?out much en thu?si?asm)

be?fore get?ting in?to her bed: she had rather en?joyed the cheat?ed, frus?trat?ed look on

Aunt Cord's face—the look of the thwart?ed miser.

"Why so long?" she re?peat?ed.

"I sup?pose you could go up the Coos and ask her."

Cordelia Del?ga?do's lips, thin to be?gin with, had pressed to? geth?er so tight?ly they

al?most dis?ap?peared. "Are you pert, mis?sy? Are you pert with me?"

"No. I'm much too tired to be pert with any?one. I want to wash—I can still feel her

hands on me, so I can—and go to bed."

"Then do so. Per?haps in the morn?ing we can dis?cuss this in more la?dy?like fash?ion.

And we must go and see Hart, of course." She fold?ed the pa?per

Rhea had given

Susan, looking pleased at the prospect of visiting Hart Thorin, and moved her

hand toward her dress pocket.

"No," Susan said, and her voice had been unusually sharp—enough so to freeze

her aunt's hand in midair. Cordelia had looked at her, frankly startled. Susan had

felt a little embarrassed by that look, but she hadn't dropped her eyes, and when

she held out her own hand, it had been steady enough.

"I'm to have the keeping of that. Aunt."

"Who tells ye to speak so?" Aunt Cord had asked, her voice almost whining with

outrage—it was close to blasphemous, Susan supposed, but for a moment Aunt

Cord's voice had reminded her of the sound the thingy made. "Who tells ye to

speak so to the woman who raised a motherless girl? To the sister of that girl's

poor dead father?"

"You know who," Susan said. She still held her hand out. "I'm to keep it, and I'm

to give it to May or Thorin. She said she didn't care what happened to it then, he

could wipe his bum with it for all of her," (the flush which suffused her aunt's face

at that had been very enjoyable) "but until then, it was to be in my keeping."

"I never heard of such a thing," Aunt Cordelia had huffed . . . but she had handed

the grimy scrap of paper back. "Giving the keep of such an important document to

a mere scrap of a girl."

Yet not too mere a scrap to be his gilly, am I? To lie under him and listen to his

bones creak and take his seed and maybe bear his child.

She'd dropped her eyes to her pocket as she put the paper away again, not wanting

Aunt Cord to see the resentment in them.

"Go up," Aunt Cord had said, brushing the froth of lace off her lap and into her

workbasket, where it lay in an accusatory tan gle. "And when you wash, do

your mouth with especial care. Cleanse it of its impudence

and disre?spect to?ward

those who have giv?en up much for love of its own?er.”

Su?san had gone silent?ly, bit?ing back a thou?sand re?torts,
mount?ing the stairs as she

had so of?ten, throbb?ing with a mix?ture of shame and re?sent?
ment.

And now here she was, in her bed and still awake as the stars
paled away and the

first brighter shades be?gan to col?or the sky. The events of the
night just past

slipped through her mind in a kind of fan?tas?ti?cal blur, like
shuf?fled play?ing

cards—and the one which turned up with the most per?sis?tence
was the face of Will

Dear?born. She thought of how that face could be hard at one
mo?ment and soft?en

so un?ex?pect?ed?ly at the next. And was it a hand?sme face?
Aye, she thought so. For

her?self, she knew so.

I’ve nev?er asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she would ac?
cept a vis?it of me. I

would ask you, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick.

Why now? Why should I meet him now, when no good can
come of it?

If it’s ka, it ‘ll come like a wind. Like a cy?clone.

She tossed from one side of the bed to the oth?er, then at last
rolled on?to her back

again. There would be no sleep for her in what re?mained of this
night, she thought.

She might as well walk out on the Drop and watch the sun come
up.

Yet she con?tin?ued to lie in bed, feel?ing some?how sick and
well at the same time,

look?ing in?to the shad?ows and lis?ten?ing to the first cries of
the morn?ing birds,

think?ing of how his mouth had felt against hers, the ten?der
grain of it and the

feel?ing of his teeth be?low his lips; the smell of his skin, the
rough tex?ture of his

shirt un?der her palms.

She now put those palms against the top of her shift and cupped
her breasts with

her fin?gers. The nip?ples were hard, like lit?tle peb?bles. And
when she touched

them, the heat be?tween her legs flared sud?den?ly and ur?

gent?ly.

She could sleep, she thought. She could, if she took care of that heat. If she knew

how.

And she did. The old wom?an had shown her. Even a girl who's in?tact don't need to

lack for a shiv?er now 'n then... Like a lit?tle bud o' silk, so it is.

Su?s?san shift?ed in bed and slipped a hand deep be?neath the sheet. She forced the old

wom?an's bright eyes and hol?low cheeks out of her mind— it wasn't hard to do at

all once you set your mind to it, she dis?cov?ered— and re?placed it with the face of

the boy with the big geld?ing and the sil?ly flat-?crowned hat. For a mo?ment the

vi?sion of her mind be?came so clear and so sweet that it was re?al, and all the rest of

her life on?ly a drab dream. In this vi?sion he kissed her over and over, their mouths

widen?ing, their tongues touch?ing; what he breathed out, she breathed in.

She burned. She burned in her bed like a torch. And when the sun fi nal?ly came

over the hori?zon some short time lat?er, she lay deeply asleep, with a faint smile on

her lips and her un?braided hair ly?ing across the side of her face and her pil?low like

loose gold.

3

In the last hour be?fore dawn, the pub?lic room of the Trav?ellers' Rest was as qui?et

as it ev?er be?came. The gaslights which turned the chan?de?lier in?to a bril?liant jew?el

un?til two of the clock or so on most nights were now turned down to gut?ter?ing

blue points, and the long, high room was shad ovy and spec?tral.

In one cor?ner lay a jum?ble of kin?dling—the re?mains of a cou?ple of chairs smashed

in a fight over a Watch Me game (the com?bat?ants were cur?rent?ly re?siding in the

High Sher?iff's drunk-?cell). In an?oth?er com?er was a fair?ly large pud?dle of

con?geal?ing puke. On the raised plat?form at the east end of the room stood a

bat?tered pi?ano; propped against its bench was the iron?wood club which be?longed

to Barkie, the sa?loon's bounc?er and all-?around tough man. Barkie him?self, the

naked mound of his scarred stom ach ris?ing above the waist? band of his cor?duroy

pants like a clot of bread dough, lay un?der the bench, snor?ing. In one hand he held

a play?ing card: the deuce of di?amonds.

At the west end of the room were the card ta?bles. Two drunks lay with their heads

on one of these, snor?ing and drool?ing on the green felt, their out?stretched hands

touch?ing. Above them, on the wall, was a pic?ture of Arthur, the Great King of Eld

astride his white stal?lion, and a sign which read (in a cu?rious mix?ture of High and

Low Speech): AR?GY?OU NOT ABOUT THE HAND YOU ARE DELT IN

CARDS OR LIFE.

Mount?ed be?hind the bar, which ran the length of the room, was a mon?strous

tro?phy: a two-?head?ed elk with a rack of antlers like a for?est grove and four glar?ing

eyes. This beast was known to lo?cal habitués of the Trav?ellers' as The Romp.

None could have said why. Some wit had care ful?ly drawn a pair of sow-?tit?ty

con?doms over the prongs of two of its antlers. Ly?ing on the bar it?self and di?rect?ly

be?neath The Romp's dis?ap prov?ing gaze was Pet?tie the Trot? ter, one of the

Trav?ellers' dancers and gilly-?girls . . . al?though Pet?tie's ac? tu?al girl?hood was well

be?hind her now, and soon she would be re?duced to do?ing her busi?ness on her

knees be?hind the Trav?ellers' rather than up?stairs in one of the tiny cribs. Her plump

legs were spread, one dan?gling over the bar on the in?side, one on the out?side, the

filthy tan?gle of her skirt frothed up be?tween. She breathed in long snores,

oc?ca?sion?al?ly twitch?ing at the feet and fat fin?gers. The on? ly oth?er sounds were the

hot sum?mer wind out?side and the soft, reg?ular snap of cards

be?ing turned one by
one.

A small ta?ble stood by it?self near the batwing doors which
gave up?on the Ham?bry

High Street; it was here that Coral Thorin, own?er of the Trav
ellers' Rest (and the

May?or's sis?ter), sat on the nights when she de scend?ed from
her suite "to be a part

of the com?pa?ny." When she came down, she came down ear?
ly—when there were

still more steaks than whiskey be?ing served across the old
scratched bar—and

went back up around the time that Sheb, the pi?ano play?er, sat
down and be?gan to

pound his hideous in?stru?ment. The May?or him?self nev?er
came in lit nil, al?though it

was well?-known that he owned at least a half?-in?ter?est in the
Trav?ellers'. Clan

Thorin en?joyed the mon?ey the place brought in; they just
didn't en joy the look of

it af?ter mid?night, when the saw?dust spread on the floor be
gan to soak up the

spilled beer and the spilled blood. Yet there was a hard streak in
Coral, who had

twen?ty years be?fore been what was called "a wild child." She
was younger than

her po?lit?ical broth?er, not so thin, and good?-look?ing in a
large?-eyed, weasel?-head?ed

way. No one sat at her ta?ble dur?ing the sa?loon's op?er?at?ing
hours—Barkie would

have put a stop to any?one who tried, and dou?ble?-quick—but
op?er?at?ing hours were

over now, the drunks most?ly gone or passed out up?stairs, Sheb
curled up and fast

asleep in the com?er be?hind his pi?ano. The soft?head?ed boy
who cleaned the place

had been gone since two o' the clock or so (chased out by jeers
and in?sults and a

few fly?ing beer?-glass?es, as he al?ways was; Roy De?pape in
par?tic?ular had no love in

his heart for that par?tic?ular lad). He would be back around
nine or so, to be?gin

ready?ing the old par?ty?-palace for an?oth?er night of hi?lar?
ity, but un?til then the man

sit?ting at Mis?tress Thorin's ta?ble had the place to him?self.

A game of Patience was laid out before him: black on red, red on black, the

partially formed Square o' Court above all, just as it was in the affairs of men. In

his left hand the player held the remains of the deck. As he flipped the cards up,

one by one, the tattoo on his right hand moved. It was discontenting somehow, as

if the coffin were breathing. The card-player was an oldish fellow, not as thin as

the Mayor or his sister, but thin. His long white hair straggled down his back. He

was deeply tanned, except for his neck, where he always burned; the flesh there

hung in scant watcles. He wore a mus-tache so long the ragged white ends hung

nearly to his jaw—a sham gun-slinger's mus-tache, many thought it, but no one used

the word "sham" to El-dred Jonas's face. He wore a white silk shirt, and a black-

handed revolver hung low on his hip. His large, red-rimmed eyes looked sad on

first glance. A second, closer look showed them only to be watery. Of emotion

they were as dead as the eyes of The Romp.

He turned up the Ace of Wands. No place for it. "Pah, you bugger," he said in an

odd, reedy voice. It quavered, as well, like the voice of a man on the verge of

tears. It fit perfectly with his damp and red-rimmed eyes. He swept the cards

together.

Before he could reshuffle, a door opened and closed softly upstairs. Jonas put the

cards aside and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun.

Then, as he recognized the sound of Reynolds's boots coming along the gallery, he

let go of the gun and drew his tobacco-pouch from his belt instead. The hem of

the cloak Reynolds always wore came in to view, and then he was coming down

the stairs, his face freshly washed and his curly red hair hanging about his ears.

Vain of his looks was dear old Mr. Reynolds, and why not? He'd sent his cock on

its ex?plor?ing way up more damp and cozy cracks than Jonas had ev?er seen in his

life, and Jonas was twice his age.

At the bot?tom of the stairs Reynolds walked along the bar, paus?ing to squeeze one

of Pet?tie's plump thighs, and then crossed to where Jonas sat with his mak?ings and

his deck of cards.

"Evening, El?dred."

"Morn?ing, Clay." Jonas opened the sack, took out a pa?per, and sprin kled to?bac?co

in?to it. His voice shook, but his hands were steady. "Like a smoke?"

"I could do with one."

Reynolds pulled out a chair, turned it around, and sat with his fore arms crossed

on its back. When Jonas hand?ed him the cigarette, Reynolds danced it along the

backs of his fin?gers, an old gun?slinger trick. The Big Cof?fin Hunters were full of

old gun?slinger tricks.

"Where's Roy? With Her Nibs?" They had been in Ham?bry a lit?tle over a month

now, and in that time De?pape had con?ceived a pas?sion for a fif?teen?-year?-old whore

named Deb?orah. Her bow?legged clump?ing walk and her way of squint?ing off in?to

the dis?tance led Jonas to sus?pect she was just an?oth?er cow?girl from a long line of

them, but she had high-?hat ways. It was Clay who had start?ed call?ing the girl Her

Nibs, or Her Majesty, or some?times (when drunk) "Roy's Coro?na?tion Cunt."

Reynolds now nod?ded. "It's like he's drunk on her."

"He'll be all right. He ain't throw?ing us over for some lit?tle snug?gle-?bun?ny with

pim?ples on her tits. Why, she's so ig?no?rant she can't spell cat. Not so much as cat,

no. I asked her."

Jonas made a sec?ond cigarette, drew a sul?fur match from the sack, and popped it

alight with his thumb?nail. He lit Reynolds's first, then his own.

A small yel?low cur came in un?der the batwing doors. The men watched it in

si?lence, smok?ing. It crossed the room, first sniffed at the cur?

dled vom?it in the

com?er, then be?gan to eat it. Its stub of a tail wagged back and forth as it dined.

Reynolds nod?ded to?ward the ad?mo?ni?tion not to ar?gue about the cards you were

dealt. "That mutt'd un?der?stand that, I'd say."

"Not at all, not at all," Jonas de?murred. "Just a dog is all he is, a spew-?eat?ing dog. I

heard a horse twen?ty min?utes ago. First on the come, then on the go. Would it

have been one of our hired watch?men?"

"You don't miss a trick, do you?"

"Don't pay to, no, don't pay a bit. Was it?"

"Yep. Fel?low who works for one of the small free?hold?ers out along the east end of

the Drop. He seen 'em come in. Three. Young. Ba?bies." Reynolds pro?nounced this

last as they did in the North'rd Ba?ronies: bab bies. "Noth?ing to wor?ry of."

"Now, now, we don't know that," Jonas said, his qua?ver?ing voice mak ing him

sound like a tem?po?riz?ing old man. "Young eyes see far, they say."

"Young eyes see what they're point?ed at," Reynolds replied. The dog trot?ted past

him, lick?ing its chops. Reynolds helped it on its way with a kick the cur was not

quite quick enough to avoid. It scut?tled back out un der the batwings, ut?ter?ing lit?tle

yike-?yike sounds that made Barkie snort thick?ly from his place of rest be?neath the

pi?ano bench. His hand opened and the play?ing card dropped out of it.

"Maybe so, maybe not," Jonas said. "In any case, they're Af?fil?ia?tion brats, sons of

big es?tates off in the Green Some?where, if Rimer and that fool he works for have it

straight. That means we'll be very, very care?ful. Walk easy, like on eggshells.

Why, we've got three more months here, at least! And those young'uns may be

here that whole time, count?ing this 'n count?ing that and putting it all down on

pa?per. Folks count?ing things ain't good for us right now. Not for men in the

re?sup?ply busi?ness.“

”Come on! It’s make-?work, that’s all—a slap on the wrist for get?ting in trou?ble.

Their dad?dies—“

”Their dad?dies know Far?son’s in charge of the whole South? west Edge now, and

sit?ting on high ground. The brats may know the same—that play?time’s purt’ near

over for the Af?fil?ia?tion and all its puke?some roy?al?ty. Can’t know, Clay. With folks

like these, you can’t know which way they’ll jump. At the very least, they may try

to do a half-?de?cent job just to try and get on the good side o’ their par?ents again.

We’ll know bet?ter when we see em, but I tell you one thing: we can’t just put guns

to the backs of their heads and drop them like broke-?leg boss?es if they see the

wrong thing. Their dad?dies might be mad at em alive, but I think they’d be very

ten?der of em dead—that’s just the way dad?dies are. We’ll want to be trig, Clay; as

trig as we can be.“

”Bet?ter leave De?pape out of it, then.“

”Roy will be fine,“ Jonas said in his qua?very voice. He dropped the stub of his

cigarette to the floor and crushed it un?der his bootheel. He looked up at The

Romp’s glassy eyes and squint?ed, as if cal?cu?lat?ing. ”To night, your friend said?

They ar?rived tonight, these brats?“

”Yep.”

”They’ll be in to see Av?ery to?mor?row, then, I reck?on.” This was Herk Av?ery, High

Sher?iff of Mejis and Chief Con?sta?ble of Ham?bry, a large man who was as loose as

a trun?dle of laun?dry.

”Reck?on so,“ Clay Reynolds said. “To present their pa?pers ‘n all.”

”Yes, sir, yes in?deedy. How-?d’you-?do, and how-?d’you-?do, and how-?d’you-?do again.”

Reynolds said noth?ing. He of?ten didn’t un?der?stand Jonas, but he had been rid?ing

with him since the age of fif?teen, and knew it was usu?al?ly bet

ter not to ask for

en?light?en?ment. If you did, you were apt to end up lis?ten ing to a cult-?man?ni lec?ture

about the oth?er worlds the old buz?zard had vis?it?ed through what he called “the

spe?cial doors.” As far as Reynolds was con?cerned, there were enough or?di?nary

doors in the world to keep him busy.

“I’ll speak to Rimer and Rimer’ll talk to the Sher?iff about where they should stay,”

Jonas said. “I think the bunkhouse at the old Bar K ranch. You know where I

mean?”

Reynolds did. In a Barony like Mejis, you got to know the few land marks in a

hur?ry. The Bar K was a de?sert?ed spread of land north?west of town, not too far

from that weird squalling canyon. They burned at the mouth of the canyon ev?ery

fall, and once, six or sev?en years ago, the wind had shift?ed and gone back wrong

and burned most of the Bar K to the ground—barns, sta?bles, the home place. It

had spared the bunkhouse, how?ev?er, and that would be a good spot for three

ten?der?feet from the In?ners. It was away from the Drop; it was al?so away from the

oil patch.

“Ye like it, don’t ye?” Jonas asked, putting on a hick Ham?bry ac?cent. “Aye, ye like

it very much, I can see ye do, my cul?ly. Ye know what they say in Cres?sia? ‘Ifye’d

steal the sil?ver from the din?ing room, first put the dog in the pantry.’ ”

Reynolds nod?ded. It was good ad?vice. “And those trucks? Those what-?do-?you-

cal?lums, tankers?”

“Fine where they are,” Jonas said. “Not that we could move em now with?out

at?tract?ing the wrong kind of at?ten?tion, eh? You and Roy want to go out there and

cov?er them with brush. Lay it on nice and thick. Day af?ter to? mor?row you’ll do it.”

“And where will you be while we’re flex?ing our mus?cles out at Cit?go?”

"By day?light? Prepar?ing for din?ner at May?or's House, you clod—the din?ner Thorin

will be giv?ing to in?tro?duce his guests from the Great World to the shit?icky

so?ci?ety of the small?er one." Jonas be?gan mak?ing an?oth?er cigarette. He gazed up at

The Romp rather than at what he was do?ing, and still spilled bare?ly a scrap of

to?bac?co. "A bath, a shave, a trim of these tan?gled old man's locks ... I might even

wax my mus?tache, Clay, what do you say to that?"

"Don't strain your?self, El?dred."

Jonas laughed, the sound shrill enough to make Barkie mut?ter and Pet?tie stir

un?easi?ly on her makeshift bar?top bed. "So Roy and I aren't in?vit?ed to this fan?cy

do." "You'll be in?vit?ed, oh yes, you'll be in?vit?ed very warm?ly," Jonas said, and

hand?ed Reynolds the fresh cigarette. He be?gan mak?ing an?oth?er for him?self. "I'll

of?fer your ex?cus?es. I'll do you boys proud, count on me. Strong men may weep."

"All so we can spend the day out there in the dust and stink, cov?er?ing those hulks.

You're too kind, Jonas."

"I'll be ask?ing ques?tions, as well," Jonas said dream?ily. "Drift?ing here and there . . .

look?ing spruce, smelling of baybe?mes . . . and ask?ing my lit?tle ques?tions. I've

known folks in our line of trade who'll go to a fat, jol?ly fel?low to find out the

gos?sip—a sa?loon-?keep?er or bar?tender, per?haps a liv?ery sta?ble own?er or one of the

chub?by fel?lows who al?ways hangs about the jail or the court?house with his thumbs

tucked in?to his vest pock ets. As for my?self. Clay, I find that a wom?an's best, and

the nar?row?er the bet?ter—one with more nose than tits stick?ing off her. I look for

one who don't paint her lips and keeps her hair scrooped back against her head."

"You have some?one in mind?"

"Yar. Cordelia Del?ga?do's her name."

"Del?ga?do?"

"You know the name, it's on the lips of ev?ery?one in this town,

I reckon. Su?san

Del?ga?do, our es?teemed May?or's soon-?to-?be gilly. Cor delia's her aun?tie. Now

here's a fact of hu?man na?ture I've found: folk are more apt to talk to some?one like

her, who plays them close, than they are to the lo?cal jol?ly types who'll buy you a

drink. And that la?dy plays them close. I'm go?ing to slip in next to her at that

din?ner, and I'm go?ing to com pli?ment her on the per?fume I doubt like hell she'll be

wear?ing, and I'm go?ing to keep her wine?glass full. Now, how sounds that for a

plan?"

"A plan for what? That's what I want to know."

"For the game of Cas?tles we may have to play," Jonas said, and all the light?ness

dropped out of his voice. "We're to be?lieve that these boys have been sent here

more as pun?ish?ment than to do any re?al job of work. It sounds plau?sible, too. I've

known rakes in my time, and it sounds plau sible, in?deed. I be?lieve it each day

un?til about three in the morn?ing, and then a lit?tle doubt sets in. And do you know

what, Clay?"

Reynolds shook his head.

"I'm right to doubt. Just as I was right to go with Rimer to old man Thorin and

con?vince him that Far?son's glass would be bet?ter with the witch-?wom?an, for the

nonce. She'll keep it in a place where a gun?slinger couldn't find it, let alone a nosy

lad who's yet to have his first piece of ar?se. These are strange times. A storm's

com?ing. And when you know the wind is go?ing to blow, it's best to keep your gear

bat?tened down."

He looked at the cigarette he had made. He had been danc?ing it along the backs of

his knuck?les, as Reynolds had done ear?li?er. Jonas pushed back the fall of his hair

and tucked the cigarette be?hind his ear.

"I don't want to smoke," he said, stand?ing up and stretch?ing. His back made small

crack?ling sounds. "I'm crazy to smoke at this hour of the morn?ing. Too many

cigarettes are apt to keep an old man like me awake."

He walked to?ward the stairs, squeez?ing Pet?tie's bare leg as he went by, al?so as

Reynolds had done. At the foot of the stairs he looked back.

"I don't want to kill them. Things are del?icate enough with?out that. I'll smell quite

a lit?tle wrong on them and not lift a fin?ger, no, not a sin?gle fin?ger of my hand. But

. . .I'd like to make them clear on their place in the great scheme o' things."

"Give them a sore paw."

Jonas bright?ened. "Yessir, part?ner, maybe a sore paw's just what I'd like to give

them. Make them think twice about tan?gling with the Big Cof fin Hunters lat?er on,

when it mat?ters. Make them swing wide around us when they see us in their road.

Yessir, that's some?thing to think about. It re?al?ly is."

He start?ed up the stairs, chuck?ling a lit?tle, his limp quite pro?nounced— it got

worse late at night. It was a limp Roland's old teach?er, Cort, might have

rec?og?nized, for Cort had seen the blow which caused it. Cort's own fa?ther had

dealt it with an iron?wood club, break?ing El?dred Jonas's leg in the yard be?hind the

Great Hall of Gilead be?fore tak?ing the boy's weapon and send?ing him west,

gun?less, in?to ex?ile.

Even?tu?al?ly, the man the boy had be?come had found a gun, of course; the ex?iles

al?ways did, if they looked hard enough. That such guns could nev?er be quite the

same as the big ones with the san?dal?wood grips might haunt them for the rest of

their lives, but those who need?ed guns could still find them, even in this world.

Reynolds watched un?til he was gone, then took his seat at Coral Thorin's desk,

shuf?fled the cards, and con?tin?ued the game which Jonas had left half?fin?ished.

Out?side, the sun was com?ing up.

CHAP?TER V

Two nights af?ter ar?riv?ing in the Barony of Mejis, Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain rode

their mounts be?neath an adobe arch with the words come in peace in?scribed above

it. Be?yond was a cob?ble?stone court?yard lit with torch?es. The resin which coat?ed

these had been doc?tored some?how so that the torch?es glowed dif?fer?ent col?ors:

green, or?angey?-red, a kind of sput?tery pink that made Roland think of fire?works.

He could hear the sound of gui tars, the mur?mur of voic?es, the laugh?ter of wom?en.

The air was redo?lent of those smells which would al?ways re?mind him of Mejis:

sea-?salt, oil, and pine.

"I don't know if I can do this," Alain mut?tered. He was a big boy with a mop of

un?ruly blond hair spilling out from un?der his stock?man's hat. He had cleaned up

well—they all had—but Alain, no so?cial but?ter?fly un?der the best of cir?cum?stances,

looked scared to death. Cuth?bert was do?ing bet ter, but Roland guessed his old

friend's pati?na of in?sou?ciance didn't go very deep. If there was to be lead?ing done

here, he would have to do it.

"You'll be fine," he told Alain. "Just—"

"Oh, he looks fine," Cuth?bert said with a ner?vous laugh as they crossed the

court?yard. Be?yond it was May?or's House, a sprawl?ing, many-?winged adobe

ha?cien?da that seemed to spill light and laugh?ter from ev?ery win?dow. "White as a

sheet, ug?ly as a—"

"Shut up," Roland said curt?ly, and the teas?ing smile tum?bled off Cuth?bert's face at

once. Roland not?ed this, then turned to Alain again. "Just don't drink any?thing with

al?co?hol in it. You know what to say on that ac?count. Re?mem?ber the rest of our

sto?ry, too. Smile. Be pleas?ant. Use what so?cial graces you have. Re?mem?ber how

the Sher?iff fell all over him self to make us feel wel?come."

Alain nodded at that, looking a little more confident.

"In the matter of social graces," Cuthbert said, "they won't have many themselves, so we should all be a step ahead."

Roland nodded, then saw that the bird's skull was back on the horn of Cuthbert's

saddle. "And get rid of that!"

Looking guilty, Cuthbert stuffed "the lookout" hurriedly into his saddle bag. Two

men wearing white jackets, white pants, and sandals were coming forward,

bowing and smiling.

"Keep your heads," Roland said, lowering his voice. "Both of you. Remember

why you're here. And remember the faces of your fathers."

He clapped Alain, who

still looked doubtful, on the shoulder. Then he turned to the hostlers. "Good even,

gents," he said. "May your days be long upon the earth."

They both grinned, their teeth flashing in the extravagant torchlight. The older one

bowed. "And your own as well, young masters. Welcome to Mayor's House."

2

The High Sheriff had welcomed them the day before every bit as happily as the

hostlers.

So far everyone had greeted them happily, even the carters they had passed on

their way into town, and that alone made Roland feel suspicious and on his guard.

He told himself he was likely being foolish—of course the locals were friendly

and helpful, that was why they had been sent here, because Mejis was both out-of-

the-way and loyal to the Affiliation—and it probably was foolish, but he thought

it best to be on close watch, just the same. To be a trifler was foolish. The three of

them were little more than children, after all, and if they fell into trouble here, it

was apt to be as a result of taking things at face value.

The combined Sheriff's office and jail of Barony was on Hill Street, overlooking

the bay. Roland didn't know for sure, but guessed that few if any

hun?gover drunks

and wife-?beat?ers any?where else in Mid-?World woke up to such pic?turesque views:

a line of many-?col?ored boathous?es to the south, the docks di?rect?ly be?low, with

boys and old men line-?fish?ing while the wom?en mend?ed nets and sails; be?yond

them, Ham?bry's small fleet mov?ing back and forth on the sparkling blue wa?ter of

the bay, set?ting their nets in the morn?ing, pulling them in the af?ter?noon.

Most build?ings on the High Street were adobe, but up here, over?look ing Ham?bry's

busi?ness sec?tion, they were as squat and bricky as any nar row lane in Gilead's

Old Quar?ter. Well kept, too, with wrought-?iron gates in front of most and tree-

shad?ed paths. The roofs were or?ange tile, the shut?ters closed against the sum?mer

sun. It was hard to be?lieve, rid?ing down this street with their hors?es' hoofs

clock?ing on the swept cob?bles, that the north?west?ern side of the Af?fil?ia?tion—the

an?cient land of Eld, Arthur's king?dom—could be on fire and in dan?ger of falling.

The jail?house was just a larg?er ver?sion of the post of?fice and land of fice; a small?er

ver?sion of the Town Gath?er?ing Hall. Ex?cept, of course, for the bars on the

win?dows fac?ing down to?ward the small har?bor.

Sher?iff Herk Av?ery was a big-?bel?lied man in a law?man's kha?ki pants and shirt. He

must have been watch?ing them ap?proach through the spy hole in the cen?ter of the

jail's iron-?band?ed front door, be?cause the door was thrown open be?fore Roland

could even reach for the turn-?bell in the cen?ter. Sher?iff Av?ery ap?peared on the

stoop, his bel?ly pre?ced?ing him as a bailiff may pre?cede My Lord Judge in?to court.

His arms were thrown wide in the most ami?able of greet?ings.

He bowed deeply to them (Cuth?bert said lat?er he was afraid the man might

over?bal?ance and go rolling down the steps; per?haps go rolling all the way down to

the har?bor) and wished them re?peat?ed good?morns, tap ping away at the base of his

throat like a mad?man the whole while. His smile was so wide it looked as if it

might cut his head clean in two. Three deputies with a dis?tinct? ly farmer?ish look

about them, dressed in kha?ki like the Sher?iff, crowd?ed in?to the door be?hind Av?ery

and gawked. That was what it was, all right, a gawk; there was just no oth?er word

for that sort of open?ly cu?ri?ous and to?tal?ly un?self?con? scious stare.

Av?ery shook each boy by the hand, con?tin?uing to bow as he did so, and noth?ing

Roland said could get him to stop un?til he was done. When he fi?nal?ly was, he

showed them in?side. The of?fice was de?light?ful?ly cool in spite of the beat?ing

mid?sum?mer sun. That was the ad?van?tage of brick, of course. It was big as well,

and clean?er than any High Sher?iff's of?fice Roland had ev?er been in be?fore . . . and

he had been in at least half a dozen over the last three years, ac? com?pa?ny?ing his

fa?ther on sev?er?al short trips and one longer pa?trol?swing.

There was a roll?top desk in the cen?ter, a no?tice?board to the right of the door (the

same sheets of foolscap had been scrib?bled on over and over; pa?per was a rare

com?mod?ity in Mid?World), and, in the far com?er, two ri?fles in a pad?locked case.

These were such an?cient blun?der?busses that Roland won?dered if there was

am?mu?ni?tion for them. He won?dered if they would fire, come to that. To the left of

the gun?case, an open door gave on the jail it?self—three cells on each side of a

short cor?ri?dor, and a smell of strong lye soap drift?ing out.

They've cleaned for our com?ing, Roland thought. He was amused, touched, and

un?easy. Cleaned it as though we were a troop of In?ner Barony horse—ca?reer

sol?diers who might want to stage a hard in?spec?tion in?stead of three lads serv?ing

pun?ish?ment de?tail.

But was such nervous care on the part of their hosts really so strange? They were

from New Canaan, after all, and folk in this tucked-away corner of the world

might well see them as a species of visiting royalty.

Sheriff Avery introduced his deputies. Roland shook hands with all of them, not

trying to memorize their names. It was Cuthbert who took care of names, and it

was a rare occasion when he dropped one. The third, a bald fellow with a monocle

hanging around his neck on a ribbon, actually dropped to one knee before them.

“Don’t do that, ye great idiot!” Avery cried, yanking him back up by the scruff of

his neck. “What kind of a bumpkin will they think ye? Be sides, you’ve

embarrassed them, so ye have!”

“That’s all right,” Roland said (he was, in fact, very embarrassed, although trying

not to show it). “We’re really nothing at all special, you know—”

“Nothing special!” Avery said, laughing. His belly, Roland noticed, did not shake

as one might have expected it to do; it was harder than it looked. The same might

be true of its owner. “Nothing special, he says! Five hundred mile or more from

the In-World they’ve come, our first official visitors from the Affiliation since a

gunslinger passed through on the Great Road four year ago, and yet he says they’re

nothing special! Would ye sit, my boys? I’ve got graf, which ye won’t want so

early in the day— p’raps not at all, given your ages (and if you’ll forgive me for

stating so bald the obvious fact of yer youth, for youth’s not a thing to be ashamed

of, so it’s not, we were all young once), and I also have white iced tea, which I

recommend most hearty, as Dave’s wife makes it and she’s a dab hand with most

any potable.”

Roland looked at Cuthbert and Alain, who nodded and smiled (and tried not to

look all at sea), then back at Sher?iff Av?ery. White tea would go down a treat in a dusty throat, he said.

One of the deputies went to fetch it, chairs were produced and set in a row at one

side of Sher?iff Av?ery's roll?top, and the busi?ness of the day commenced.

"You know who ye are and where ye hail from, and I know the same," Sher?iff

Av?ery said, sit?ting down in his own chair (it uttered a feeble groan beneath his

bulk but held steady). "I can hear In-?World in yer voices, but more im?por?tant, I

can see it in yer faces.

"Yet we hold to the old ways here in Ham?bry, sleepy and rural as we may be; aye,

we hold to our course and re?mem?ber the faces of our fa?thers as well's we can. So,

al?though I'd not keep yer long from yer du?ties, and if ye'll for?give me for the

im?per?ti?nence, I'd like a look at any pa?pers and doc?uments of pas?sage ye might just

hap?pen to've brought in?to town with ye."

They just "hap?pened" to have brought all of their pa?pers in?to town with them, as

Roland was sure Sher?iff Av?ery well knew they would. He went through them

quite slow?ly for a man who'd promised not to hold them from their du?ties, trac?ing

the well-?fold?ed sheets (the linen content so high that the doc?uments were per?haps

closer to cloth than pa?per) with one pudgy fin?ger, his lips mov?ing. Ev?ery now and

then the fin?ger would reverse as he reread a line. The two other deputies stood

behind him, looking sage?ly down over his large shoulders. Roland wondered if

either could ac?tu?al?ly read.

William Dear?born. Drover's son.

Richard Stock?worth. Ranch?er's son.

Arthur Heath. Stock?line breed?er's son.

The iden?ti?fi?ca?tion doc?ument belong?ing to each was signed by an at testor—James

Reed (of Hemphill) in the case of Dear?born, Piet Raven-?head (of Pen?nil?ton) in the

case of Stock?worth, Lu?cas Rivers (of Gilead) in the case of Heath. All in or?der,

de?scrip?tions nice?ly matched. The pa?pers were hand?ed back with pro?fuse thanks.

Roland next hand?ed Av?ery a let?ter which he took from his wal?let with some care.

Av?ery han?dled it in the same fash?ion, his eyes grow?ing wide as he saw the frank at

the bot?tom. “ ‘Pon my soul, boys! ‘Twas a gun?slinger wrote this!”

“Aye, so it was,” Cuth?bert agreed in a voice of won?der. Roland kicked his

an?kle—hard—with?out tak?ing his re?spect?ful eyes from Av?ery’s face.

The let?ter above the frank was from one Steven De?schain of Gilead, a gun?slinger

(which was to say a knight, squire, peace?mak?er, and Baron . . . the last ti?tle hav?ing

al?most no mean?ing in the mo?dem day, de?spite all John Far?son’s rant?ing) of the

twen?ty-?nin?th gen?er?ation de?scend?ed from Arthur of Eld, on the side line of de?scent

(the long-?de?scend?ed gel of one of Arthur’s many gillies, in oth?er words). To May?or

Hartwell Thorin, Chan cel?lor Kim?ba Rimer, and High Sher?iff Herkimer Av?ery, it

sent greet?ings and rec?om?mend?ed to their no?tice the three young men who

de?liv?ered this doc?ument, Mas?ters Dear?born, Stock?worth, and Heath. These had

been sent on spe?cial mis?sion from the Af?fil?ia?tion to serve as coun?ters of all

ma teri?als which might serve the Af?fil?ia?tion in time of need (the word war was

omit?ted from the doc?ument, but glowed be?tween ev?ery line). Steven De?schain, on

be?half of the Af?fil?ia?tion of Ba?ronies, ex?hort?ed Mis?ters Thorin, Rimer, and Av?ery

to af?ford the Af?fil?ia?tion’s nom?inat?ed coun?ters ev?ery help in their ser?vice, and to be

par?tic?ular?ly care?ful in the enu?mera tions of all live?stock, all sup?plies of food, and

all forms of trans?port. Dear born, Stock?worth, and Heath would be in Mejis for at

least three months, De?schain wrote, pos?si?bly as long as a

year. The document

finished by inviting any or all of the addressed public officials to “write us word of

these young men and their deportment, in all detail as you shall imagine of

interest to us.” And, it begged, “Do not stint in this matter, if you love us.”

Tell us if they behaved themselves, in other words. Tell us if they’ve learned their

lessons.

The deputy with the monocular came back while the High Sheriff was perusing this

document. He carried a tray loaded with four glasses of white tea and bent down

with it like a butler. Roland murmured thanks and handed the glasses around. He

took the last for himself, raised it to his lips, and saw Alain looking at him, his

blue eyes bright in his stolid face.

Alain shook his glass slightly—just enough to make the ice tinkle— and Roland

responded with the barest sliver of a nod. He had expected cool tea from a jug kept

in a nearby springhouse, but there were actual chunks of ice in the glasses. Ice in

high summer. It was interesting.

And the tea was, as promised, delicious.

Avery finished the letter and handed it back to Roland with the air of one passing

on a holy relic. “Ye want to keep that safe about yer person, Will Dearborn—aye,

very safe indeed!”

“Yes, sir.” He tucked the letter and his identification back into his purse. His

friends “Richard” and “Arthur” were doing the same.

“This is excellent white tea, sir,” Alain said. “I’ve never had better.”

“Aye,” Avery said, sipping from his own glass. “ ‘Tis the honey that makes it so

fearsome. Eh, Dave?”

The deputy with the monocular smiled from his place by the notice-board. “I

believe so, but Judy don’t like to say. She had the recipe from her mother.”

“Aye, we must remember the faces of our mothers, too, so we

must." Sher?iff

Av?ery looked sen?ti?men?tal for a mo?ment, but Roland had an idea that the face of

his moth?er was the fur?thest thing from the big man's mind just then. He turned to

Alain, and sen?ti?ment was re?placed by a sur?pris?ing shrewd?ness.

"Ye're won?der?ing about the ice, Mas?ter Stock?worth."

Alain start?ed. "Well, I..."

"Ye ex?pect?ed no such ameni?ty in a back?wa?ter like Ham?bry, I'll war rant," Av?ery

said, and al?though there was a josh?ing qual?ity on top of his voice, Roland thought

there was some?thing else en?tire?ly un?der?neath.

He doesn't like us. He doesn't like what he thinks of as our "city ways. " He hasn't

known us long enough to know what kind of ways we have, if any at all, but

al?ready he doesn't like them. He thinks we're a trio of snot?noses; that we see him

and ev?ery?one else here as coun?try bump?kins.

"Not just Ham?bry," Alain said qui?et?ly. "Ice is as rare in the In?ner Arc these days as

any?where else, Sher?iff Av?ery. When I grew up, I saw it most?ly as a spe?cial treat at

birth?day par?ties and such."

"There was al?ways ice on Glow?ing Day," Cuth?bert put in. He spoke with very un-

Cuth?ber?tian qui?et. "Ex?cept for the fire?works, that's what we liked about it most."

"Is that so, is that so," Sher?iff Av?ery said in an amazed, won?ders?-will?-nev?er?-cease

tone. Av?ery per?haps didn't like them rid?ing in like this, didn't like hav?ing to take

up what he would prob?ably call "half the damn morn?ing" with them; he didn't like

their clothes, their fan?cy iden?ti?fi?ca?tion pa pers, their ac?cents, or their youth. Least

of all their youth. Roland could un?der?stand all that, but won?dered if it was the

whole sto?ry. If there was some?thing else go?ing on here, what was it?

"There's a gas?-fired re?frig?er?ator and stove in the Town Gath?er?ing Hall," Av?ery

said. "Both work. There's plen?ty of earth?-gas out at Cit?go—

that's the oil patch east

of town. Yer passed it on yer way in, I wot."

They nod?ded.

"Stove's nob?but a cu?rios?ity these days—a his?to?ry les?son for the

schoolchil?dren—but the re?frig?er?ator comes in handy, so it does." Av?ery held up

his glass and looked through the side. " 'Spe?cial?ly in sum?mer."

He sipped some tea, smacked his lips, and smiled at Alain, "You see? No

mys?tery."

"I'm sur?prised you haven't found use for the oil," Roland said. "No gen?er?ators in town, Sher?iff?"

"Aye, there be four or five," Av?ery said. "The biggest is out at Fran?cis Lengyll's

Rock?ing B ranch, and I re?call when it useter run. It's HON?DA. Do ye ken?nit that

name, boys? HON?DA?"

"I've seen it once or twice," Roland said, "on old mo?tor-?driv?en bi?cy?cles."

"Aye? In any case, none of the gen?er?ators will run on the oil from the Cit?go patch.

Tis too thick. Tar?ry goo, is all. We have no re?finer?ies here."

"I see," Alain said. "In any case, ice in sum?mer's a treat. How?ev?er it comes to the

glass." He let one of the chunks slip in?to his mouth, and crunched it be?tween his teeth.

Av?ery looked at him a mo?ment longer, as if to make sure the sub?ject was closed,

then switched his gaze back to Roland. His fat face was once more ra?di?ant with his

broad, un?trust?wor?thy smile.

"May?or Thorin has asked me to ex?tend ye his very best greet?ings, and con?vey his

re?grets for not bein here to?day—very busy is our Lord May?or, very busy in?deed.

But he's laid on a din?ner-?par?ty at May?or's House to mor?row evening—sev?en o' the

clock for most folk, eight for you young fel?lows ... so you can make a bit of an

en?trance, I imag?ine, add a touch o' dra?ma, like. And I need not tell such as

your?elves, who?ve prob?ably at tend?ed more such par?ties
than I?ve had hot din?ners,

that it would be best to ar?rive pret?ty much on the dot.“

”Is it fan?cy?dress?“ Cuth?bert asked un?easi?ly. ”Be?cause
we?ve come a long way,

al?most four hun?dred wheels, and we didn?t pack for?mal wear
and sash?es, none of

us.“

Av?ery was chuck?ling—more hon?est?ly this time, Roland
thought, per haps be?cause

he felt ”Arthur“ had dis?played a streak of un?so?phis?ti?ca?tion
and in?se?cu?ri?ty. ”Nay,

young mas?ter, Thorin un?der?stands ye?ve come to do a job—
next door to workin

cow?boys, ye be! ‘Ware they don?t have ye out drag?gin nets in
the bay next!“

From the com?er, Dave—the deputy with the mon?ocle—
honked un?ex pect?ed

laugh?ter. Per?haps it was the sort of joke you had to be lo?cal
to un?der?stand, Roland

thought.

”Wear the best ye have, and ye?ll be fine. There?ll be no one
there in sash?es, in any

case—that?s not how things are done in Ham?bry.“ Again

Roland was struck by the man?s con?stant smil?ing den?igra?
tion of his town ;iul

Barony . . . and the re?sents?ment of the out?siders which lay just
be neath it.

”In any case, ye?ll find yer?selves work?ing more than play?ing
to?mor row night, I

imag?ine. Hart?s in?vit?ed all the large ranch?ers, stock?lin?ers,
and live?stock own?ers

from this part of the Barony ... not that there?s so many, you un?
der?stand, bein as

how Mejis is next door to desert once you get west o? the Drop.
But ev?ery?one

whose goods and chat?tel you?ve been sent to count will be
there, and I think you?ll

find all of them loy?al Af?fil?ia tion men, ready and ea?ger to
help. There?s Fran?cis

Lengyll of the Rock?ing B ... John Croy?don of the Pi?ano Ranch
.. . Hen?ry Wert?ner,

who?s the Barony?s stock?lin?er as well as a horse?breed?er in
his own right . . . Hash

Ren?frew, who owns the Lazy Su?san, the biggest horse?ranch

in Mejis (not that it's

much by the stan?dards you fel?lows are used to, I wot) . . . and there'll be oth?ers, as

well. Rimer'll in?tro?duce you, and get you about your busi?ness right smart."

Ronald nod?ded and turned to Cuth?bert. "You'll want to be on your met?tle

to?mor?row night."

Cuth?bert nod?ded. "Don't fear me, Will, I'll note em all."

Av?ery sipped more tea, eye?ing them over his glass with a rogu?ish ex pres?sion so

false it made Roland want to squirm.

"Most of em's got daugh?ters of mar?riage?able age, and they'll bring em. You boys

want to look out."

Roland de?cid?ed he'd had enough tea and hypocrisy for one morn?ing. He nod?ded,

emp?tied his glass, smiled (hop?ing his looked more gen?uine than Av?ery's now

looked to him), and got to his feet. Cuth?bert and Alain took the cue and did

like?wise.

"Thank you for the tea, and for the wel?come," Roland said. "Please send a

mes?sage to May?or Thorin, thank?ing him for his kind?ness and telling him that he'll

see us to?mor?row, at eight o' the clock, prompt."

"Aye. So I will."

Roland then turned to Dave. That wor?thy was so sur?prised to be no ticed again

that he re?coiled, al?most bump?ing his head on the no?tice?board. "And please thank

your wife for the tea. It was won?der?ful."

"I will. Thankee-?sai."

They went back out?side, High Sher?iff Av?ery herd?ing them along like a ge?nial,

over?weight sheep?dog.

"As to where you'll lo?cate—" he be?gan as they de?scend?ed the steps and start?ed

down the walk. As soon as they hit the sun?shine, he be?gan to sweat.

"Oh, land, I for?got to ask you about that," Roland said, knock?ing the heel of his

hand against his fore?head. "We've camped out on that long slope, lots of hors?es as

you go down the turf, I'm sure you know where I mean—"

"The Drop, aye."

"—but with?out per?mis?sion, be?cause we don't yet know who to ask."

"That'd be John Croy?don's land, and I'm sure he wouldn't be?grudge ye, but we

mean to do ye bet?ter than that. There's a spread north?west of here, the Bar K. Used

to b'long to the Gar?ber fam?ily, but they gave it up and moved on af?ter a fire. Now

it b'longs to the Horse?men's As?so?cia tion—that's a lit?tle lo?cal group of farm?ers and

ranch?ers. I spoke to Fran?cis Lengyll about you fel?lows—he's the H.A. pres?ident

just cur?rent—and he said 'We'll put em out to the old Gar?ber place, why not?' "

"Why not?" Cuth?bert agreed in a gen?tle, mus?ing voice. Roland shot him a sharp

glance, but Cuth?bert was look?ing down at the har?bor, where the small fish?ing

boats skit?tered to and fro like wa?ter?bugs.

"Aye, just what I said, 'Why not, in?deed?' I said. The home place burned to a

cin?der, but the bunkhouse still stands; so does the sta?ble and the cook-?shack next

door to it. On May?or Thorin's or?ders, I've tak?en the lib?er?ty of stock?ing the larder

and hav?ing the bunkhouse swept out and spruced up a lit?tle. Ye may see the

oc?ca?sion?al bug, but noth?ing that'll bite or sting . . . and no snakes, un?less there's a

few un?der the floor, and if there are, let em stay there's what I say. Hey, boys? Let

em stay there!"

"Let em stay there, right un?der the floor where they're hap?py," Cuth bert agreed,

still gaz?ing down at the har?bor with his arms fold?ed over his chest.

Av?ery gave him a brief, un?cer?tain glance, his smile flick?er?ing a bit at the com?ers.

Then he turned back to Roland, and the smile shone out strong?ly once more.

"There's no holes in the roof, lad, and if it rains, ye'll be dry. What think ye of

that? Does it sound well to ye?"

"Better than we deserve. I think that you've been very efficient and May Thorin's

been far too kind." And he did think that. The question was why. "But we

appreciate his thoughtfulness. Don't we, boys?"

Cuthbert and Alain made vigorous assent.

"And we accept with thanks."

Avery nodded. "I'll tell him. Go safely, boys."

They had reached the hitching rail. Avery once more shook hands all around, this

time saving his keenest looks for their horses.

"Until tomorrow night, then, young gents?"

"Tomorrow night," Roland agreed.

"Will ye be able to find the Bark on your own, do yer think?"

Again Roland was struck by the man's unspoken contempt and unconscious

condescension. Yet perhaps it was to the good. If the High Sheriff thought they

were stupid, who knew what might come of it?

"We'll find it," Cuthbert said, mounting up. Avery was looking suspiciously at the

rook's skull on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle. Cuthbert saw him looking, but for

once managed to keep his mouth shut. Roland was both amazed and pleased by

this unexpected reticence. "Fare you well, Sheriff."

"And you, boy."

He stood there by the hitching post, a large man in a khaki shirt with sweat-stains

around the armpits and black boots that looked too shiny for a working sheriff's

feet. And where's the horse that could support him through a day of riding?

Roland thought. I'd like to see the cut of that Cayuse.

Avery waved to them as they went. The other deputies came down the walk,

Deputy Dave in the forefront. They waved, too.

3

The moment the Affiliation brats mounted on their fathers' expensive horse flesh

were around the corner and headed downhill to the High Street, the sheriff and the

deputies stopped waving. Avery turned to Dave Hollis, whose expression of

slightly stupid awe had been replaced by one marginally

more in?tel?li?gent.

“What think ye, Dave?”

Dave lift?ed his mon?ocle to his mouth and be?gan to nib?ble ner?vous?ly at its brass

edg?ing, a habit about which Sher?iff Av?ery had long since ceased to nag him. Even

Dave’s wife, Judy, had giv?en up on that score, and Judy Hol?lis —Judy Wert?ner that

was—was a fair en?gine when it came to get ting her own way.

“Soft,” Dave said. “Soft as eggs just dropped out of a chick?en’s ass.”

“May?hap,” Av?ery said, putting his thumbs in his belt and rock?ing enor?mous?ly back

and forth, “but the one did most of the talk?ing, him in the flat?head hat, he doesn’t

think he’s soft.”

“Don’t mat?ter what he thinks,” Dave said, still nib?bling at his eye glass. “He’s in

Ham?bry, now. He may have to change his way of think?ing to our’n.”

Be?hind him, the oth?er deputies laughed. Even Av?ery smiled. They would leave the

rich boys alone if the rich boys left them alone—those were or?ders, straight from

May?or’s House—but Av?ery had to ad?mit that he wouldn’t mind a lit?tle dust?up

with them, so he wouldn’t. He would en?joy putting his boot in?to the balls of the

one with that id?iotic bird’s skull on his sad?dle-?horn—stand?ing there and mock?ing

him, he’d been, think?ing all the while that Herk Av?ery was too coun?try-?dumb to

know what he was up to—but the thing he’d re?al?ty en?joy would be beat?ing the

cool look from the eyes of the boy in the flat?head preach?er’s hat, see?ing a hot?ter

ex pres?sion of fear rise up in them as Mr. Will Dear?born of Hemphill re?al ized that

New Canaan was far away and his rich fa?ther couldn’t help him.

“Aye,” he said, clap?ping Dave on the shoul?der. “May?hap he’ll have to change his

way of think?ing.” He smiled—one very dif?fer?ent from any of those he had shown

the Af?fil?ia?tion coun?ters. “May?hap they all will.”

The three boys rode in single file until they were past the Travellers' Rest (a young

and obviously retarded man with kinky black hair looked up from scrubbing the

brick stoop and waved to them; they waved back). Then they moved up abreast,

Roland in the middle.

"What did you think of our new friend, the High Sheriff?" Roland asked.

"I have no opinion," Cuthbert said brightly. "No, none at all. Opinion is politics,

and politics is an evil which has caused many a fellow to be hung while he's still

young and pretty." He leaned forward and tapped the rook's skull with his

knuckles. "The lookout didn't care for him, though. I'm sorry to say that our

faithful lookout thought Sheriff Avery a fat bag of guts without a trustworthy bone

in his body."

Roland turned to Alain. "And you, young Master Stockworth?"

Alain considered it for some time, as was his way, chewing a piece of grass he'd

bent over sadly to pluck from his side of the road. At last he said: "If he came

upon us burning in the street, I don't think he'd piss on us to put us out."

Cuthbert laughed heartily at that. "And you, Will? How do you say, dear captain?"

"He doesn't interest me much ... but one thing he said does. Given that the horse-

meadow they call the Drop has to be at least thirty wheels long and runs five or

more to the dusty desert, how do you suppose Sheriff Avery knew we were on the

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part of it that belongs to Croydon's Pinaro Ranch?"

They looked at him, first with surprise, then speculation. After a moment

Cuthbert leaned forward and rapped once more on the rook's skull. "We're being

watched, and you never reported it? No supper for you, sir, and it'll be the

stockade the next time it happens!"

But before they had gone much farther, Roland's thoughts of Sheriff Avery gave

way to more pleasant ones of Susan Delgado. He would see her the following

night, of that he was sure. He wondered if her hair would be down.

He couldn't wait to find out.

5

Now here they were, at Mayor's House. Let the game begin, Roland thought, not

clear on what that meant even as the phrase went through his mind, surely not

thinking of Castles . . . not then.

The hostlers led their mounts away, and for a moment the three of them stood at

the foot of the steps—huddled, almost, as horses do in unfriendly weather—their

beardless faces washed by the light of the torches. From inside, the guitars played

and voices were raised in a fresh eddy of laughter.

"Do we knock?" Cuthbert asked. "Or just open and march in?"

Roland was spared answering. The main door of the had was thrown open and two

women stepped out, both wearing long white-colored dresses that reminded all

three boys of the dresses stockmen's wives wore in their own part of the world.

Their hair was caught back in snoods that sparkled with some bright diamondy

stuff in the light of the torches.

The plumper of the two stepped forward, smiling, and dropped them a deep

curtsey. Her ear-rings, which looked like square-cut fire-stones, flashed and bobbed.

"You are the young men from the Affiliation, so you are, and

wel?come you are, as

well. Good?even, sirs, and may your days be long up?on the earth!"

They bowed in uni?son, boots for?ward, and thanked her in an unin tend?ed cho?rus

that made her laugh and clap her hands. The tall wom?an be side her of?fered them a

smile as spare as her frame.

"I am Olive Thorin," the plump wom?an said, "the May?or's wife. This is my sis?ter-in-?law, Coral."

Coral Thorin, still with that nar?row smile (it bare?ly creased her lips and touched

her eyes not at all), dipped them a to?ken curt?sey. Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain

bowed again over their out?stretched legs.

"I wel?come you to Seafront," Olive Thorin said, her dig?ni?ty leav?ened and made

pleas?ant by her art?less smile, her ob?vi?ous daz?zle?ment at the ap pear?ance of her

young vis?itors from In-?World. "Come to our house with joy. I say so with all my heart, so I do."

"And so we will, madam," Roland said, "for your greet?ing has made us joy?ful." He

took her hand, and, with no cal?cu?la?tion what?ev?er, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

Her de?light?ed laugh?ter made him smile. He liked Olive Thorin on sight, and it was

per?haps well he met some?one of that sort ear?ly on, for, with the prob?lem?at?ic

ex?cep?tion of Su?san Del?ga?do, he met no one else he liked, no one else he trust?ed,

all that night.

6

It was warm enough even with the seabreeze, and the cloak- and coat-?col?lec?tor in

the foy?er looked as though he'd had lit?tle or no cus?tom. Roland wasn't en?tire?ly

sur?prised to see that it was Deputy Dave, his re main?ing bits of hair slicked back

with some sort of gleam?ing grease and his mon?ocle now ly?ing on the snow-?white

breast of a house?man's jack?et. Roland gave him a nod. Dave, his hands clasped

be?hind his back, re?turned it.

Two men—Sher?iff Av?ery and an el?der?ly gent as gaunt as Old Doc?tor Death in a

car?toon—came to?ward them. Be?yond, through a pair of dou?ble doors now open

wide, a whole room?ful of peo?ple stood about with crys?tal punch?-cups in their

hands, talk?ing and tak?ing lit?tle bits of food from the trays which were cir?cu?lat?ing.

Roland had time for just one nar?row-?eyed glance to?ward Cuth?bert:

Ev?ery?thing. Ev?ery name, ev?ery face . . . ev?ery nu?ance. Es?pe?cial?ly those.

Cuth?bert raised an eye?brow—his dis?creet ver?sion of a nod—and then Roland was

pulled, willy-?nil?ly, in?to the evening, his first re?al evening of ser?vice as a work?ing

gun?slinger. And he had rarely worked hard?er.

Old Doc?tor Death turned out to be Kim?ba Rimer, Thorin's Chan?cel?lor and Min?is?ter

of In?ven?to?ry (Roland sus?pect?ed the ti?tle had been made up spe?cial for their vis?it).

He was eas?ily five inch?es taller than Roland, who was con?sidered tall in Gilead,

and his skin was pale as can?dle?wax. Not un?healthy-?look?ing; just pale. Wings of

iron-?gray hair float?ed away from ei?ther side of his head, gos?samer as cob?webs.

The top of his skull was com?plete?ly bald. Bal?anced on his whelk of a nose was a

pince-?nez.

“My boys!” he said, when the in?tro?duc?tions had been made. He had the smooth,

sad?ly sin?cere voice of a politi?cian or an un?der?tak?er. “Wel?come to Mejis! To

Ham?bry! And to Seafront, our hum?ble May?or's House!”

“If this is hum?ble, I should won?der at the palace your folk might build,” Roland

said. It was a mild enough re?mark, more pleas?antry than wit?ti?cism (he or?di?nar?ily

left the wit to Bert), but Chan?cel?lor Rimer laughed hard. So did Sher?iff Av?ery.

“Come, boys!” Rimer said, when he ap?par?ent?ly felt he had ex?pressed enough

amuse?ment. “The May?or awaits you with im?pa?tience, I'm

sure."

"Aye," said a timid voice from behind them. The skinny sister-in-law, Coral, had

disappeared, but Olive Thorin was still there, looking up at the newcomers with

her hands decorously clasped before that area of her body which might once have

been her waist. She was still smiling her hopeful, pleasant smile. "Very eager to

meet you, Hart is, very eager, in deed. Shall I conduct them, Kimba, or—"

"Nay, nay, you mustn't trouble yourself with so many other guests to attend,"

Rimer said.

"I suppose you're right." She curtseyed to Roland and his companions a final

time, and although she still smiled and although the smile looked completely

genuine to Roland, he thought: She's unhappy about something, all the same.

Desperately so, I think.

"Gentlemen?" Rimer asked. The teeth in his smile were almost disconcertingly

huge. "Will ye come?"

He led them past the grinning Sheriff and into the reception hall.

7

Roland was hardly overwhelmed by it; he had, after all, been in the Great Hall of

Gilead—the Hall of the Grandfathers, it was sometimes called—and had even

peeped down on the great party which was held there each year, the so-called

Dance of Easterling, which marked the end of Wide Earth and the advent of

Sowing. There were five chandeliers in the Great Hall instead of just one, and lit

with electric bulbs rather than oil lamps. The dress of the partygoers (many of

them expensive young men and women who had never done a hand's turn of work

in their lives, a fact of which John Farson spoke at every opportunity) had been

richer, the music had been fuller, the company of older and nobler lines which

grew clos?er and clos?er to?geth?er as they stretched back to?ward Arthur Eld, he of the
white horse and uni?fy?ing sword.

Yet there was life here, and plen?ty of it. There was a ro?bust?ness that had been

miss?ing in Gilead, and not just at East?er?ling, ei?ther. The tex?ture he felt as he

stepped in?to the May?or's House re?cep?tion room was the sort of thing, Roland

re?lect?ed, that you didn't en?tire?ly miss when it was gone, be?cause it slipped away

qui?et?ly and painless?ly. Like blood from a vein cut in a tub filled with hot wa?ter.

The room—al?most but not quite grand enough to be a hall—was cir cu?lar, its

pan?elled walls dec?orat?ed by paint?ings (most quite bad) of pre?vi ous May?ors. On a

raised stand to the right of the doors lead?ing in?to the din?ing area, four grin?ning

gui?tarists in tati jack?ets and som?breros were play?ing some?thing that sound?ed like a

waltz with pep?per on it. In the cen ter of the floor was a ta?ble sup?port?ing two cut-

glass punch?bowls, one vast and grand, the oth?er small?er and plain?er. The white-

jack?et?ed fel?low in charge of the dip?ping-?out op?er?ations was an?oth?er of Av?ery's

deputies.

Con?trary to what the High Sher?iff had told them the day be?fore, sev er?al of the

men were wear?ing sash?es of var?ious col?ors, but Roland didn't feel too out of place

in his white silk shirt, black string tie, and one pair of stovepipe dress trousers. For

ev?ery man wear?ing a sash, he saw three wear?ing the sort of dowdy, box-?tailed

coats that he as?so?ci?at?ed with stock men at church, and he saw sev?er?al oth?ers

(younger men, for the most part) who weren't wear?ing coats at all. Some of the

wom?en wore jew?el?ry (though noth?ing so ex?pen?sive as sai Thorin's fired?im

ear?rings), and few looked as if they'd missed many meals, but they al?so wore

clothes Roland rec?og?nized: the long, round-?col?lared dress?

es, usu?al?ly with the lace

fringe of a col?ored un?der?skirt show?ing be?low the hem, the dark shoes with low

heels, the snoods (most sparkling with gem-?dust, as those of Olive and Coral

Thorin had been).

And then he saw one who was very dif?fer?ent.

It was Su?san Del?ga?do, of course, shim?mer?ing and al?most too beau?ti ful to look at

in a blue silk dress with a high waist and a square-?cut bodice which showed the

tops of her breasts. Around her neck was a sap?phire pen?dant that made Olive

Thorin's ear?rings look like paste. She stood next to a man wear?ing a sash the col?or

of coals in a hot wood?fire. That deep or?ange-?red was the Barony's col?or, and

Roland sup?posed that the man was their host, but for the mo?ment Roland bare?ly

saw him. His eye was held by Su?san Del?ga?do: the blue dress, the tanned skin, the

tri?an?gles of col?or, too pale and per?fect to be make?up, which ran light?ly up her

cheeks; most of all her hair, which was un?bound tonight and fell to her waist like a

shim?mer of palest silk. He want?ed her, sud?den?ly and com?plete?ly, with a des?per?ate

depth of feel?ing that felt like sick?ness. Ev?ery?thing he was and ev?ery?thing he had

come for, it seemed, was sec?ondary to her.

She turned a lit?tle, then, and spied him. Her eyes (they were gray, he saw) widened

the tini?est bit. He thought that the col?or in her cheeks deepened a lit?tle. Her

lips—lips that had touched his as they stood on a dark road, he thought with

won?der—part?ed a lit?tle. Then the man stand?ing next to Thorin (al?so tall, al?so

skin?ny, with a mus?tache and long white hair ly ing on the dark shoul?ders of his

coat) said some?thing, and she turned back to him. A mo?ment lat?er the group

around Thorin was laugh?ing, Su?san in clud?ed. The man with the white hair didn't

join them, but smiled thin?ly.

Roland, hopping his face did not give away the fact that his heart was pounding like

a hammer, was led directly to this group, which stood close to the punchbowls.

Discontently, he could feel Rimer's bony confirmation of fingers clamped to his arm

above the elbow. More clearly he could smell mingled perfumes, the oil from the

lamps on the walls, the aroma of the ocean. And thought, for no reason at all, Oh, I

am dying. I am dying.

Take hold of yourself, Roland of Gilead. Stop this foolishness, for your father's

sake. Take hold!

He tried ... to some degree succeeded. . . and knew he would be lost the next time

she looked at him. It was her eyes. The other night, in the dark, he hadn't been able

to see those fog-colored eyes. I didn't know how lucky I was, he thought wryly.

"May Thorin?" Rimer asked. "May I present our guests from the Inner

Baronies?"

Thorin turned away from the man with the long white hair and the woman

standing next to him, his face brightening. He was shorter than his Chancellor but

just as thin, and his build was peculiar: a short and narrow-shouldered upper body

over impressively long and skinny legs, He looked, Roland thought, like the sort of

bird you should glimpse in a marsh at dawn, bobbing for its breakfast.

"Aye, you may!" he cried in a strong, high voice. "Indeed you may, we've been

waiting with impatience, great impatience, for this moment! Well met we are,

very well met! Welcome, sirs! May your evening in this house of which I am the

fleeting proprietor be happy, and may your days be long upon the earth!"

Roland took the bony outstretched hand, heard the knuckles crack beneath his

grip, looked for an expression of discomfort on the Mayor's face, and was relieved

to see none. He bowed low over his outstretched leg.

"William Dearborn, May or Thorin, at your service. Thank you for your welcome,

and may your own days be long upon the earth."

"Arthur Heath" made his manners next, then "Richard Stockworth." Thorin's smile

widened at each deep bow. Rimer did his best to beam, but looked unused to it.

The man with the long white hair took a glass of punch, passed it to his female

company, and continued to smile thinly. Roland was aware that everyone in the

room—the guests numbered perhaps fifty in all—was looking at them, but what

he felt most upon his skin, beating like a soft wing, was her regard. He could see

the blue silk of her dress from the side of one eye, but did not dare look at her

more directly.

"Was your trip difficult?" Thorin was asking. "Did you have adventures and

experiences? We would hear all the details at dinner, so we would, for we

have few guests from the Inner Arc these days." His eager, slightly fatuous smile

faded; his tufted brows drew together. "Did you encounter patrols of Farson?"

"No, Excellentcy," Roland said. "We—"

"Nay, lad, nay—no Excellentcy, I won't have it, and the fisherfolk and horse-

drovers I serve wouldn't, even if I would. Just May or Thorin, if you please."

"Thank you. We saw many strange things on our journey, May or Thorin, but no

Good Men."

"Good Men!" Rimer jerked out, and his upper lip lifted in a smile which made him

look doglike. "Good Men, indeed!"

"We would hear it all, every word," Thorin said. "But before I forget my manners

in my eagerness, young gentlemen, let me introduce you to these close around me.

Kimba you've met; this formidable fellow to my left is Eldred Jonas, chief of my

newly installed security staff." Thorin's smile looked mo-

men?tar?ily em?bar?rassed.

"I'm not con?vinced that I need ex?tra se?cu?ri?ty, Sher?iff Av?ery's al?ways been quite

enough to keep the peace in our com?er of the world, but Kim?ba in?sists. And when

Kim?ba in sists, the May?or must bow."

"Very wise, sir," Rimer said, and bowed him?self. They all laughed, save for Jonas,

who sim?ply held on?to his nar?row smile.

Jonas nod?ded. "Pleased, gents, I'm sure." The voice was a reedy qua ver. He then

wished them long days up?on the earth, all three, com?ing to Roland last in his

round of hand?shak?ing. His grip was dry and firm, ut ter?ly un?touched by the tremor

in his voice. And now Roland no?ticed the queer blue shape tat?tooed on the back of

the man's right hand, in the web bing be?tween thumb and first fin?ger. It looked

like a cof?fin.

"Long days, pleas?ant nights," Roland said with hard?ly a thought. It was a greet?ing

from his child?hood, and it was on?ly lat?er that he would re?al?ize it was one more apt

to be as?so?ci?at?ed with Gilead than with any such ru?ral place as Hemphill. Just a

small slip, but he was be?gin?ning to be?lieve that their mar?gin for such slips might

be a good deal less than his fa?ther had thought when he had sent Roland here to

get him out of Marten's way.

"And to you," Jonas said. His bright eyes mea?sured Roland with a thor?ough?ness

that was close to in?so?lence, still hold?ing his hand. Then he re?leased it and stepped

back.

"Cordelia Del?ga?do," May?or Thorin said, next bow?ing to the wom?an who had been

speak?ing to Jonas. As Roland al?so bowed in her di?rec?tion, he saw the fam?ily

re?sem?blance . . . ex?cept that what looked gen?er?ous and love?ly on Su?san's face

looked pinched and fold?ed on the face be?fore him now. Not the girl's moth?er;

Roland guessed that Cordelia Del?ga?do was a bit too young for

that.

“And our es?pe?cial friend, Miss Su?san Del?ga?do,” Thorin fin?ished, sound?ing

flus?tered (Roland sup?posed she would have that ef?fect on any man, even an old

one like the May?or). Thorin urged her for?ward, bob?bing his head and grin?ning,

one of his knuck?le-?choked hands pressed against the small of her back, and

Roland felt an in?stant of poi?sonous jeal?ousy. Ridicu?lous, giv?en this man’s age and

his plump, pleas?ant wife, but it was there, all right, and it was sharp. Sharp as a

bee’s ass, Cort would have said.

Then her face tilt?ed up to his, and he was look?ing in?to her eyes again.

He had heard of drown?ing in a wom?an’s eyes in some po?em or sto?ry, and thought

it ridicu?lous. He still thought it ridicu?lous, but un?der?stood it was per?fect?ly

pos?si?ble, nonethe?less. And she knew it. He saw con?cern in her eyes, per?haps even fear.

Promise me that if we meet at May?or’s House, we meet for the first time.

The mem?ory of those words had a sober?ing, clar?ify?ing ef?fect, and seemed to widen

his vi?sion a lit?tle. Enough for him to be aware that the wom?an be?side Jonas, the

one who shared some of Su?san’s fea?tures, was look?ing at the girl with a mix?ture of

cu?rios?ity and alarm.

He bowed low, but did lit?tle more than touch her ring?less out?stretched hand. Even

so, he felt some?thing like a spark jump be?tween their fin?gers. From the mo?men?tary

widen?ing of those eyes, he thought that she felt it, too.

“Pleased to meet you, sai,” he said. His at?tempt to be ca?sual sound?ed tin?ny and

false in his own ears. Still, he was be?gun, it felt like the whole world was watch?ing

him (them), and there was noth?ing to do but go on with it. He tapped his throat

three times. “May your days be long—”

“Aye, and yours, Mr. Dear?born. Thankee-?sai.”

She turned to Alain with a rapidity that was almost rude, then to Cuthbert, who

bowed, tapped, then said gravely: "Might I recline briefly at your feet, miss? Your

beauty has loosened my knees. I'm sure a few moments spent looking up at your

profile from below, with the back of my head on these cool tiles, would put me right."

They all laughed at that—even Jonas and Miss Cordelia. Susan blushed prettily

and slapped the back of Cuthbert's hand. For once Roland blessed his friend's

relentless sense of foolery.

Another man joined the party by the punchbowl. This newcomer was blocky and

blessedly unthin in his boxtail coat. His cheeks burned with high color that

looked like windburn rather than drink, and his pale eyes lay in nets of wrinkles. A

rancher; Roland had ridden often enough with his father to know the look.

"There'll be maids aplenty to meet you boys tonight," the newcomer said with a

friendly enough smile. "Ye'll find y'selves drunk on perfume if ye're not careful.

But I'd like my crack at you before you meet em. Fran Lengyll, at your service."

His grip was strong and quick; no bowing or other nonsense went with it.

"I own the Rocking B ... or it owns me, whichever way ye want to look at it. I'm

also boss of the Horsemen's Association, at least until they fire me. The Bar K was

my idea. Hope it's all right."

"It's perfect, sir," Alain said. "Clean and dry and room for twenty. Thank you.

You've been too kind."

"Nonsense," Lengyll said, looking pleased all the same as he knocked back a glass

of punch. "We're all in this together, boy. John Farson's but one bad straw in a

field of wrong-headedness these days. The world's moved on, folks say. Huh! So it

has, aye, and a good piece down the road to hell is where it's

moved on to. Our job

is to hold the hay out of the fur nace as well as we can, as long as we can. For the

sake of our chil?dren even more than for that of our fa?thers.”

“Hear, hear,” May?or Thorin said in a voice that strove for the high ground of

solem?ni?ty and fell with a splash in?to fa?tu?ity in?stead. Roland no ticed the scrawny

old fel?low was grip?ping one of Su?san’s hands (she seemed al?most un?aware of it;

was look?ing in?tent?ly at Lengyll in?stead), and sud?den?ly he un?der?stood: the May?or

was ei?ther her un?cle or per?haps a cousin of some close de?gree. Lengyll ig?nored

both, look?ing at the three new?com?ers in?stead, scru?ti?niz?ing each in turn and

fin?ish?ing with Roland.

“Any?thing us in Mejis can do to help, lad, just ask—me, John Croy?don, Hash

Ren?frew, Jake White, Hank Wert?ner, any or all. Ye’ll meet em tonight, aye, their

wives and sons and daugh?ters as well, and ye need on?ly ask. We may be a good

piece out from the hub of New Canaan here, but we’re strong for the Af?fil?ia?tion,

all the same. Aye, very strong.”

“Well spo?ken,” Rimer said qui?et?ly.

“And now,” Lengyll said, “we’ll toast your ar?rival prop?er. And ye’ve had to wait

too long al?ready for a dip of punch. It’s dry as dust ye must be.”

He turned to the punch?bowls and reached for the la?dle in the larg?er and more

or?nate of the two, wav?ing off the at?ten?dant, clear?ly want?ing to hon?or them by

serv?ing them him?self.

“Mr. Lengyll,” Roland said qui?et?ly. Yet there was a force of com mand in that

voice; Fran Lengyll heard it and turned.

“The small?er bowl is soft punch, is it not?”

Lengyll con?sidered this, at first not un?der?stand?ing. Then his eye?brow went up. For

the first time he seemed to con?sider Roland and the oth?ers not as liv?ing sym?bols of

the Af?fil?ia?tion and the In?ner Ba?ronies, but as ac?tu?al hu?man be?ings. Young ones.

On?ly boys, when you got right down to it.

“Aye?”

“Draw ours from that, if you’d be so kind.” He felt all eyes up? on them now. Her

eyes par?tic?ular?ly. He kept his own firm?ly fixed on the ranch?er, but his pe?riph?er?al

vi?sion was good, and he was very aware that Jonas’s thin smile had resur?faced.

Jonas knew what this was about al ready. Roland sup?posed Thorin and Rimer did,

as well. These coun?try mice knew a lot. More than they should, and he would need

to think about that care?ful?ly lat?er. It was the least of his con?cerns at the cur?rent

mo?ment, how?ev?er.

“We have for?got?ten the faces of our fa?thers in a mat?ter that has some bear?ing on

our post?ing to Ham?bry.” Roland was un?com?fort?ably aware that he was now

mak?ing a speech, like it or not. It wasn’t the whole room he was

ad?dress?ing—thank the gods for lit?tle bless?ings—but the cir?cle of lis?ten?ers had

grown well be?yond the orig?inal group. Yet there was noth?ing for it but to fin?ish;

the boat was launched. “I needn’t go in?to de?tails—nor would you ex?pect them, I

know—but I should say that we promised not to in?dulge in spir?its dur?ing our time

here. As penance, you see.”

Her gaze. He could still feel it on his skin, it seemed.

For a mo?ment there was com?plete qui?et in the lit?tle group around the punch?bowls,

and then Lengyll said: “Your fa?ther would be proud to hear ye speak so frank,

Will Dear?born—aye, so he would. And what boy worth his salt didn’t get up to a

lit?tle noise ‘n wind from time to time?” He clapped Roland on the shoul?der, and

al?though the grip of his hand was firm and his smile looked gen?uine, his eyes were

hard to read, on?ly gleams of spec?ula?tion deep in those beds of wrin?kles. “In his

place, may I be proud for him?”

“Yes,” Roland said, smil?ing in re?turn. “And with my thanks.”

“And mine,” Cuthbert said.

“Mine as well,” Alain said quietly, taking the offered cup of soft punch and

bowing to Lengyll.

Lengyll filled more cups and handed them rapidly around. Those already holding

cups found them plucked away and replaced with fresh cups of the soft punch.

When each of the immediate group had one, Lengyll turned, apparently intending

to offer the toast himself. Rimer tapped him on the shoulder, shook his head

slightly, and cut his eyes toward the Mayor. That worthy was looking at them with

his eyes rather popped and his jaw slightly dropped. To Roland he looked like an

enthralled player in a penny seat; all he needed was a lapful of orange-peel.

Lengyll followed the Chancellor's glance and then nodded.

Rimer next caught the eye of the guitar player standing at the center of the

musicians. He stopped playing; so did the others. The guests looked that way, then

back to the center of the room when Thorin began speaking. There was nothing

ridiculous about his voice when he put it to use as he now did—it was carrying

and pleasant.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my friends,” he said. “I would ask you to help me in

welcoming three new friends—young men from the Inner Barones, fine young

men who have dared great distances and many perils on behalf of the Affiliation,

and in the service of order and peace.”

Susan Delgado set her punch-cup aside, retrieved her hand (with some difficulty)

from her uncle's grip, and began to clap. Others joined in. The applause which

swept the room was brief but warm. Eldred Jonas did not, Roland noticed, put his

cup aside to join in.

Thorin turned to Roland, smiling. He raised his cup. “May I set you on with a

word, Will Dearborn?”

"Aye, so you may, and with thanks," Roland said. There was laugh?ter and fresh

ap?plause at his us?age.

Thorin raised his cup even high?er. Ev?ery?one else in the room fol lowed suit;

crys?tal gleamed like star?points in the light of the chan?de?lier.

"Ladies and gen?tle?men, I give you William Dear?born of Hemphill, Richard

Stock?worth of Pen?nil?ton, and Arthur Heath of Gilead."

Gasps and mur?murs at that last, as if their May?or had an?nounced Arthur Heath of

Heav?en.

"Take of them well, give to them well, make their days in Mejis sweet, and their

mem?ories sweet?er. Help them in their work and to ad vance the caus?es which are

so dear to all of us. May their days be long up?on the earth. So says your May?or."

"SO SAY WE ALL!" they thun?dered back.

Thorin drank; the rest fol?lowed his ex?am?ple. There was fresh ap plause. Roland

turned, help?less to stop him?self, and found Su?san's eyes again at once. For a

mo?ment she looked at him ful?ly, and in her frank gaze he saw that she was near?ly

as shak?en by his pres?ence as he was by hers. Then the old?er wom?an who looked

like her bent and mur?mured some thing in?to her ear. Su?san turned away, her face a

com?posed mask . . . but he had seen her re?gard in her eyes. And thought again that

what was done might be un?done, and what was spo?ken might be un?spo?ken.

8

As they passed in?to the din?ing hall, which had tonight been set with four long

tres?tle ta?bles (so close there was bare?ly room to move be? tween them), Cordelia

tugged her niece's hand, pulling her back from the May?or and Jonas, who had

fall?en in?to con?ver?sa?tion with Fran Lengyll.

"Why looked you at him so, miss?" Cordelia whis?pered fu?ri?ous?ly. The ver?ti?cal line

had ap?peared on her fore?head. Tonight it looked as deep as a trench. "What ails

thy pret?ty, stupid head?” Thy. Just that was enough to tell Su?san that her aunt was
in a fine rage.

“Looked at who? And how?” Her tone sound?ed right, she thought, but oh, her
heart—

The hand over hers clamped down, hurt?ing. “Play no fid?dle with me, Miss Oh So

Young and Pret?ty! Have ye ev?er seen that fine-?turned row of pins be?fore? Tell me
the truth!”

“No, how could I? Aunt, you’re hurt?ing me.”

Aunt Cord smiled bale?ful?ly and clamped down hard?er. “Bet?ter a small hurt now

than a large one lat?er. Curb your im?pu?dence. And curb your flir?ta?tious eyes.”

“Aunt, I don’t know what you—”

“I think you do,” Cordelia said grim?ly, press?ing her niece close to the wood

pan?elling to al?low the guests to stream past them. When the ranch?er who owned

the boathouse next to theirs said hel?lo, Aunt Cord smiled pleas?ant?ly at him and

wished him good?even be?fore turn?ing back to Su?san.

“Mind me, miss—mind me well. If I saw yer cow’s eyes, ye may be sure that half

the com?pa?ny saw. Well, what’s done is done, but it stops now. Your time for such

child-?maid games is over. Do you un?der?stand?”

Su?san was silent, her face set?ting in those stub?born lines Cordelia hat?ed most of

all; it was an ex?pres?sion that al?ways made her feel like slap ping her head?strong

niece un?til her nose bled and her great gray doe’s eyes gushed tears.

“Ye’ve made a vow and a con?tract. Pa?pers have been passed, the weird-?wom?an has

been con?sult?ed, mon?ey has changed hands. And ye’ve giv?en your promise. If that

means noth?ing to such as yer?self, girl, re?mem ber what it’d mean to yer fa?ther.”

Tears rose in Su?san’s eyes again, and Cordelia was glad to see them. Her broth?er

had been an im?prov?ident ir?ri?ta?tion, ca?pa?ble of pro?duc?ing on?ly this far too pret?ty

wom?an?child ... but he had his us?es, even dead.

“Now promise ye’ll keep yer eyes to your?self, and that if ye see that boy com?ing,

ye’ll swing wide—aye, wide’s you can—to stay out of his way.”

“I promise. Aunt,” Su?san whis?pered. “I do.”

Cordelia smiled. She was re?al?ly quite pret?ty when she smiled.

“It’s well, then. Let’s

go in. We’re be?ing looked at. Hold my arm, child!”

Su?san clasped her aunt’s pow?dered arm. They en?tered the room side by side, their

dress?es rustling, the sap?phire pen?dant on the swell of Su san’s breast flash?ing, and

many there were who re?marked up?on how alike they looked, and how well pleased

poor old Pat Del?ga?do would have been with them.

9

Roland was seat?ed near the head of the cen?ter ta?ble, be?tween Hash Ren frew (a

ranch?er even big?ger and block?ier than Lengyll) and Thorin’s rather mo?rose sis?ter,

Coral. Ren?frew had been handy with the punch; now, as the soup was brought to

ta?ble, he set about prov?ing him?self equal?ly adept with the ale.

He talked about the fish?ing trade (“not what it useter be, boy, al though it’s less

mu?ties they pull up in their nets these days, ‘n that’s a blessin”), the farm?ing trade

(“folks round here can grow most any?thin, long’s it’s corn or beans”), and fi?nal?ly

about those things clear?ly clos?est to his heart: horsin, coursing, and ranchin. Those

busi?ness?es went on as al ways, aye, so they did, al?though times had been hard in

the grass-?and-?sea-?coast Ba?ronies for forty year or more.

Weren’t the blood?lines clar?ify?ing? Roland asked. For they had be?gun to do so

where he came from.

Aye, Ren?frew agreed, ig?nor?ing his pota?to soup and gob?bling barbe cued beef-

strips in?stead. These he scooped up with a bare hand and washed down with more

ale. Aye, young mas?ter, blood?lines was clar?ify ing won?der?ful well, in?deed they

were, three colts out of ev?ery five were thread?ed stock—in

thor?ough?bred as well

as com?mon lines, ken?nit—and the fourth could be kept and worked if not bred.

On?ly one in five these days born with ex?tra legs or ex?tra eyes or its guts on the

out?side, and that was good. But the birthrates were way down, so they were; the

stal?lions had as much ram as ev?er in their ram?rods, it seemed, but not as much

pow?der and ball.

“Beg?gin your par?don, ma’am,” Ren?frew said, lean?ing briefly across Roland to

Coral Thorin. She smiled her thin smile (it re?mind?ed Roland of Jonas’s), trudged

her spoon through her soup, and said noth?ing. Ren?frew emp? tied his ale-?cup,

smacked his lips hearti?ly, and held the cup out again. As it was recharged, he

turned back to Roland.

Things weren’t good, not as they once had been, but they could be worse. Would

be worse, if that bug?ger Far?son had his way. (This time he didn’t both?er ex?cus?ing

him?self to sai Thorin.) They all had to pull to geth?er, that was the tick?et—rich and

poor, great and small, while pulling could still do some good. And then he

sec?ond?ed Lengyll, telling Roland that what?ev?er he and his friends want?ed,

what?ev?er they need?ed, they had on?ly to name it.

“In?for?ma?tion should be enough,” Roland said. “Num?bers of things.”

“Aye, can’t be a counter with?out num?bers,” Ren?frew agreed, and sprayed beery

laugh?ter. On Roland’s left hand, Coral Thorin nib?bled a bit of green (the beef-

strips she had not so much as touched), smiled her nar row smile, and went on

boat?ing with her spoon. Roland guessed there was noth?ing wrong with her ears,

though, and that her broth?er might get a com?plete re?port of their con?ver?sa?tion. Or

pos?si?bly it would be Rimer to get the re?port. For, while it was too ear?ly to say for

sure, Roland had an idea that Rimer might be the re?al force

here. Along, per?haps,

with sai Jonas.

“For in?stance,” Roland said, “how many rid?ing hors?es do you think we may be

able to re?port back to the Af?fil?ia?tion?”

“Tithe or to?tal?”

“To?tal.”

Ren?frew put his cup down and ap?peared to cal?cu?late. As he did, Roland looked

across the ta?ble and saw Lengyll and Hen?ry Wert?ner, the Barony’s stock?lin?er,

ex?change a quick glance. They had heard. And he saw some?thing else as well,

when he re?turned his at?ten?tion to his seat?mate: Hash Ren?frew was drunk, but

like?ly not as drunk as he want?ed young Will Dear?born to be?lieve.

“To?tal, ye say—not just what we owe the Af?fil?ia?tion, or might be able to send

along in a pinch.”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s see, young sai. Fran must run a hun?dred’n forty head; John Croy?don’s

got near a hun?dred. Hank Wert?ner’s got forty on his own hook, and must run six?ty

more out along the Drop for the Barony. Gov’mint hoss?flesh, Mr. Dear?born.”

Roland smiled. “I know it well. Split hoofs, low necks, no speed, bot tom?less

bel?lies.”

Ren?frew laughed hard at that, nod?ding .. . but Roland found him?self won?der?ing if

the man was re?al?ly amused. In Ham?bry, the wa?ters on top and the wa?ters down

be?low seemed to run in dif?fer?ent di?rec?tions.

“As for my?self, I’ve had a bad ten or twelve year—sand-?eye, brain fever, cab?bards.

At one time there was two hun?dred head of run?ning hors?es out there on the Drop

with the Lazy Su?san brand on em; now there can’t be more than eighty.”

Roland nod?ded. “So we’re speak?ing of four hun?dred and twen?ty head.”

“Oh, more’n that,” Ren?frew said with a laugh. He went to pick up his ale-?cup,

struck it with the side of one work- and weath?er-?red?dened hand, knocked it over,

curled, picked it up, then cursed the ale?boy who came slow to re?fill it.

“More than that?” Roland prompt?ed, when Ren?frew was fi?nal?ly cocked and locked

and ready to re?sume ac?tion.

“Ye have to re?mem?ber, Mr. Dear?born, that this is hoss-?coun?try more than it’s

fish?er-?coun?try. We josh each oth?er, we and the fish?ers, but there’s many a scale-

scrap?er got a nag put away be?hind his house, or in the Barony sta?bles if they have

no roof of their own to keep the rain off a boss’s head. ‘Twas her poor da useter

keep the Barony sta?bles.”

Ren?frew nod?ded to?ward Su?san, who was seat?ed across and three seats up from

Roland him?self—just a ta?ble’s turn from the May?or, who was, of course, seat?ed at

the head. Roland found her place?ment there pass?ing pe cu?liar, es?pe?cial?ly giv?en the

fact that the May?or’s mis?sus had been seat?ed al?most all the way at the far end of

the ta?ble, with Cuth?bert on one side of her and some ranch?er to whom they had not

yet been in?tro?duced on her oth?er.

Roland sup?posed an old fel?low like Thorin might like to have a pret?ty young

re?la?tion near at hand to help draw at?ten?tion to him, or to cheer up his own eye, but

it still seemed odd. Al?most an in?sult to one’s wife. If he was tired of her

con?ver?sa?tion, why not put her at the head of an?oth?er ta?ble?

They have their own cus?toms, that’s all, and the cus?toms of the coun?try aren’t

your con?cern. This man’s crazy horse-?count is your con?cern.

“How many oth?er run?ning hors?es, would you say?” he asked Ren?frew. “In all?”

Ren?frew gazed at him shrewd?ly. “An hon?est an?swer’ll not come back to haunt me,

will it, son?ny? I’m an Af?fil?ia?tion man—so I am, Af?fil?ia?tion to the core, they’ll

carve Ex?cal?ibur on my grave?head, like as not—but I’d not see

Ham?bry and Mejis

stripped of all its trea?sure.”

“That won’t hap?pen, sai. How could we force you to give up what you don’t want

to in any case? Such forces as we have are all com?mit?ted in the north and west,

against the Good Man.”

Ren?frew con?sid?ered this, then nod?ded.

“And may I not be Will to you?”

Ren?frew bright?ened, nod?ded, and of?fered his hand a sec?ond time. He grinned

broad?ly when Roland this time shook it in both of his, the over-?and-?un?der grip

pre?ferred by drovers and cow?boys.

“These’re bad times we live in, Will, and they’ve bred bad man?ners. I’d guess there

are prob?ably an?oth?er hun?dred and fifty head of horse in and about Mejis. Good

ones is what I mean.”

“Big-?hat stock.”

Ren?frew nod?ded, clapped Roland on the back, in?gest?ed a good?ly quaff of ale. “Big-hats, aye.”

From the top of their ta?ble there came a burst of laugh?ter. Jonas had ap?par?ent?ly

said some?thing fun?ny. Su?sana laughed with?out reser?va?tion, her head tilt?ed back and

her hands clasped be?fore the sap?phire pen?dant. Cordelia, who sat with the girl on

her left and Jonas on her right, was al?so laugh?ing. Thorin was ab?so?lute?ly

con?vulsed, rock?ing back and forth in his chair, wip?ing his eyes with a nap?kin.

“Yon’s a love?ly girl,” Ren?frew said. He spoke al?most rev?er?ent?ly. Roland could not

quite swear that a small sound—a wom?an?ly hmmpf, per haps—had come from his

oth?er side. He glanced in that di?rec?tion and saw sai Thorin still sport?ing with her

soup. He looked back to?ward the head of the ta?ble.

“Is the May?or her un?cle, or per?haps her cousin?” Roland asked.

What hap?pened next had a height?ened clar?ity in his mem?ory, as if some?one had

turned up all the col?ors and sounds of the world. The vel?vet

swags be?hind Su?san

sud?den?ly seemed a brighter red; the caw of laugh?ter which came from Coral

Thorin was the sound of a break?ing branch. It was sure?ly loud enough to make

ev?ery?one in the vicin?ity stop their con?ver?sa tions and look at her, Roland thought .

. . ex?cept on?ly Ren?frew and the two ranch?ers across the ta?ble did.

“Her un?cle!” It was her first con?ver?sa?tion of the evening. “Her un?cle, that’s good.

Eh, Ren?nie?”

Ren?frew said noth?ing, on?ly pushed his ale-?cup away and fi?nal?ly be gan to eat his soup.

“I’m sur?prised at ye, young man, so I am. Ye may be from the In-?World, but oh

good?ness, who?ev?er tend?ed to your ed?uca?tion of the re?al world—the one out?side of

books ‘n maps—stopped a mite short, I’d say. She’s his—” And then a word so

thick with di?alect that Roland had no idea what it was. Seefin, it sound?ed, or

per?haps sheevin.

“I beg par?don?” He was smil?ing, but the smile felt cold and false on his mouth.

There was a heav?iness in his bel?ly, as if the punch and the soup and the sin?gle beef-

strip he had eat?en for po?lite?ness’ sake had all lumped to?geth?er in his stom?ach. Do

you serve? he’d asked her, mean?ing did she serve at ta?ble. May?hap she did serve,

but like?ly she did it in a room rather more pri?vate than this. Sud?den?ly he want?ed to

hear no more; had not the slight?est in?ter?est in the mean?ing of the word the May?or’s

sis?ter had used.

An?oth?er burst of laugh?ter rocked the top of the ta?ble. Su?san laughed with her head

back, her cheeks glow?ing, her eyes sparkling. One strap of her dress had slipped

down her arm, dis?clos?ing the ten?der hol?low of her shoul?der. As he watched, his

heart full of fear and long?ing, she brushed it ab?sent?ly back in?to place with the

palm of her hand.

"It means 'quiet little woman,' " Renfrew said, clearly uncomfortable. "It's an old term, not used much these days—"

"Stop it, Rennie," said Coral Thorin. Then, to Roland: "He's just an old cowboy, and can't quit showing horse shit even when he's away from his beloved nags.

Sheevin means side-wife. In the time of my great-grandmother, it meant whore . . .

but one of a certain kind." She looked with a pale eye at Susan, who was now

sipping ale, then turned back to Roland. There was a species of baleful amusement

in her gaze, an expression that Roland liked little. "The kind of whore you had to

pay for in coin, the kind too fine for the trade of simple folk."

"She's his gilly?" Roland asked through lips which felt as if they had been iced.

"Aye," Coral said. "Not consummated, not until the Reap—and none too happy

about that is my brother, I'll warrant—but bought and paid for just as in the old

days. So she is." Coral paused, then said, "Her father would die of shame if he

could see her." She spoke with a kind of melancholy satisfaction.

"I hardly think we should judge the Mayor too harshly," Renfrew said in an

embarrassed, pontifical voice.

Coral ignored him. She studied the line of Susan's jaw, the soft swell of her bosom

above the silken edge of her bodice, the fall of her hair. The thin humor was gone

from Coral Thorin's face. In it now was a somehow chilling species of contempt.

In spite of himself, Roland found himself imagining the Mayor's knuckle-bunchy

hands pushing down the straps of Susan's dress, crawling over her naked

shoulders, plunging like gray crabs into the cave beneath her hair. He looked

away, toward the table's lower end, and what he saw there was no better. It was

Olive Thorin that his eye found—Olive, who had been relegated

ed to the foot of the

table, Olive, looking up at the laughing folk who sat at its head. Looking up at her

husband, who had replaced her with a beautiful young girl, and gifted that girl

with a pendant which made her own finger-rings look dowdy by comparison.

There was none of Coral's hatred and angry contempt on her face. Looking at her

might have been easier if that were so. She only gazed at her husband with eyes

that were humble, hopeful, and unhappy. Now Roland understood stood why he had

thought her sad. She had every reason to be sad.

More laughter from the Mayor's party; Rimer had leaned over from the next table,

where he was presiding, to contribute some wit-ticism. It must have been a good

one. This time even Jonas was laughing. Susan put a hand to her bosom, then took

her napkin and raised it to wipe a tear of laughter from the corner of her eye.

Thorin covered her other hand. She looked toward Roland and met his eyes, still

laughing. He thought of Olive Thorin, sitting down there at the foot of the table,

with the salt and spices, an untouched bowl of soup before her and that unhappy

smile on her face. Seated where the girl could see her, as well. And he thought

that, had he been wearing his guns, he might well have drawn one and put a bullet

in Susan Delgado's cold and whoring little heart.

And thought: Who do you hope to fool?

Then one of the serving boys was there, putting a plate offish in front of him.

Roland thought he had never felt less like eating in his life . . . but he would eat,

just the same, just as he would turn his mind to the questions raised by his

conversation with Hash Renfrew of the Lazy Susan Ranch. He would remember

the face of his father.

Yes, I'll remember it very well, he thought. If only I could forget the one above you

sap?phire.

10

The din?ner was in?ter?minable, and there was no es?cape af?ter?ward. The ta?ble at the

cen?ter of the re?cep?tion room had been re?moved, and when the guests came back

that way—like a tide which has surged as high as it can and now ebbs—they

formed two ad?ja?cent cir?cles at the di?rec?tion of a spright?ly lit?tle red?haired man

whom Cuth?bert lat?er dubbed May?or Thorin's Min?is?ter of Fun.

The boy-?girl, boy-?girl, boy-?girl cir?cling was ac?com?plished with much laugh?ter and

some dif?fi?cul?ty (Roland guessed that about three-?quar?ters of the guests were now

fair?ly well shot?tered), and then the gui?tarists struck up a que?sa. This proved to be a

sim?ple sort of reel. The cir?cles re?volved in op?po?site di?rec?tions, all hold?ing hands,

un?til the mu?sic stopped for a mo?ment. Then the cou?ple cre?at?ed at the place where

the two cir?cles touched danced at the cen?ter of the fe?male part?ner's cir?cle, while

ev?ery?one else clapped and cheered.

The lead mu?si?cian man?aged this old and clear?ly well-?loved tra?di?tion with a keen

eye to the ridicu?lous, stop?ping his mucha?chos in or?der to create the most amus?ing

cou?ples: tall wom?an-?short man, fat wom?an-?skin?ny man, old wom?an-?young man

(Cuth?bert end?ed up side-?kick?ing with a wom?an as old as his great-?grand?dame, to

the sai's breath?less cack?les and the com?pa?ny's gen?er?al roars of ap?proval).

Then, just when Roland was think?ing this stupid dance would nev?er end, the mu?sic

stopped and he found him?self fac?ing Su?sana Del?ga?do.

For a mo?ment he could do noth?ing but stare at her, feel?ing that his eyes must burst

from their sock?ets, feel?ing that he could move nei?ther of his stupid feet. Then she

raised her arms, the mu?sic be?gan, the cir?cle (this one in?clud?ed May?or Thorin and

the watch?ful, nar?row?ly smil?ing El?dred Jonas) ap?plaud?ed,

and he led her in?to the
dance.

At first, as he spun her through a fig?ure (his feet moved with
all their usu?al grace

and pre?ci?sion, numb or not), he felt like a man made of glass.
Then he be?came

aware of her body touch?ing his, and the rus?tle of her dress,
and he was all too

hu?man again.

She moved clos?er for just a mo?ment, and when she spoke, her
breath tick?led in his

ear. He won?dered if a wom?an could drive you mad—lit?er?al?
ly mad. He wouldn't

have be?lieved so be?fore tonight, but tonight ev?ery?thing had
changed.

"Thank you for your dis?cre?tion and your pro?pri?ety," she
whis?pered.

He pulled back from her a lit?tle and at the same time twirled
her, his hand against

the small of her back—palm rest?ing on cool satin, fin?gers
touch?ing warm skin. Her

feet fol?lowed his with nev?er a pause or stut?ter; they moved
with per?fect grace,

un?afraid of his great and boot?ed clod?-stom?pers even in their
flim?sy silk slip?pers.

"I can be dis?creet, sai," he said. "As for pro?pri?ety? I'm
amazed you even know the
word."

She looked up in?to his cold face, her smile fad?ing. He saw
anger come in to fill it,

but be?fore anger there was hurt, as if he had slapped her. He
felt both glad and

sor?ry at the same time.

"Why do you speak so?" she whis?pered.

The mu?sic stopped be?fore he could an?swer ... al?though how
he might have

an?swered, he had no idea. She curt?seyed and he bowed, while
those sur?round?ing

them clapped and whis?tled. They went back to their places, to
their sep?arate

cir?cles, and the gui?tars be?gan again. Roland felt his hands
grasped on ei?ther side

and be?gan to turn with the cir?cle once more.

Laugh?ing. Kick?ing. Clap?ping on the beat. Feel?ing her some?
where be hind him,

do?ing the same. Won?der?ing if she want?ed as bad?ly as he did to be out of here, to

be in the dark, to be alone in the dark, where he could put his false face aside

be?fore the re?al one be?neath could grow hot enough to set it afire.

CHAP?TER VI

sheemie

1

Around ten o' the clock, the trio of young men from the In?ner Ba?ronies made their

man?ners to host and host?ess, then slipped off in?to the fra?grant sum?mer night.

Cordelia Del?ga?do, who hap?ened to be stand?ing near Hen?ry Wert?ner, the Barony's

stock?lin?er, re?marked that they must be tired. Wert?ner laughed at this and replied in

an ac?cent so thick it was al?most com?ic: "Nay, ma'am, byes that age're like rats

ex?plorin en wood?pile af?ter hokkut rain, so they are. It'll be hours yet be?fore the

bunks out'ta Bar K sees em."

Olive Thorin left the pub?lic rooms short?ly af?ter the boys, plead?ing a headache. She

was pale enough to be al?most be?liev?able.

By eleven, the May?or, his Chan?cel?lor, and the chief of his new?ly in au?gu?rat?ed

se?cu?ri?ty staff were con?vers?ing in the May?or's study with the last few late-?stay?ing

guests (all ranch?ers, all mem?bers of the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation). The talk was

brief but in?tense. Sev?er?al of the ranch?ers pres ent ex?pressed re?lief that the

Af?fil?ia?tion's emis?saries were so young. El?dred Jonas said noth?ing to this, on?ly

looked down at his pale, long-?fin?gered hands and smiled his nar?row smile.

By mid?night, Su?sane was at home and un?dress?ing for bed. She didn't have the

sap?phire to wor?ry about, at least; that was a Barony jew?el, and had been tucked

back in?to the strong?box at May?or's House be?fore she left, de?spite what Mr. Ain't-

We-?Fine Will Dear?born might think about it and her. May?or Thorin (she couldn't

bring her?self to call him Hart, al though he had asked her to do so—not even to

her?self could she do it) had tak?en it back from her him?self. In the hall?way just off

from the re?cep?tion room, that had been, by the tapestry show?ing Arthur Eld

car?ry?ing his sword out of the pyra?mid in which it had been en?tombled. And he

(Thorin, not the Eld) had tak?en the op?por?tu?ni?ty to kiss her mouth and have a quick

fum?ble at her breasts—a part of her that had felt much too naked dur?ing that en?tire

in?ter?minable evening. “I burn for Reap?ing,” he had whis?pered melo?dra?mat?ical?ly in

her ear. His breath had been redo?lent of brandy. “Each day of this sum?mer seems

an age.”

Now, in her room, brush?ing her hair with harsh, quick strokes and look?ing out at

the wan?ing moon, she thought she had nev?er been so an?gry in her life as she was

at this mo?ment: an?gry at Thorin, an?gry at Aunt Cord, fu?ri?ous with that self-

righteous prig of a Will Dear?born. Most of all, how ev?er, she was an?gry at her?self.

“There’s three things ye can do in any sit?ua?tion, girl,” her fa?ther had told her once.

“Ye can de?cide to do a thing, ye can de?cide not to do a thing ... or ye can de?cide

not to de?cide.” That last, her da had nev?er quite come out and said (he hadn’t

need?ed to) was the choice of weak?lings and fools. She had promised her?self she

would nev?er elect it her?self. . . and yet she had al?lowed her?self to drift in?to this

ug?ly sit?ua?tion. Now all the choic?es seemed bad and hon?or?less, all the roads ei?ther

filled with rocks or hub?-?deep in mud.

In her room at May?or’s House (she had not shared a cham?ber with Hart for ten

years, or a bed, even briefly, for five), Olive sat in a night?-?dress of un?dec?orat?ed

white cot?ton, al?so look?ing out at the wan?ing moon. Af?ter clos?ing her?self in?to this

safe and pri?vate place, she had wept. . . but not for long. Now

she was dry-eyed,

and felt as hollow as a dead tree.

And what was the worst? That Hart didn't understand how humiliated she was, and

not just for herself. He was too busy strutting and preening (also too busy trying to

look down the front of Lady Delgado's dress at every opportunity) to know that

people—his own Chancellor among them—were laughing at him behind his back.

That might stop when the girl had returned to her aunt's with a big belly, but that

wouldn't be for months yet. The witch had seen to that. It would be even longer if

the girl kindled slowly. And what was the silliest, most humiliating thing of all?

That she, John Haverley's daughter Olive, still loved her husband. Hart was an

overweening, vain, glorious, prancing loon of a man, but she still loved him.

There was something else, something quite apart from the matter of Hart's turning

in to George o' Goats in his late middle age: she thought there was an intrigue of

some sort going on, something dangerous and quite likely dishonorable. Hart

knew a little about it, but she guessed he knew only what Kimba Rimer and that

hideous limping man wanted him to know.

There was a time, and not so long ago, when Hart wouldn't have allowed himself

to be fobbed off in such fashion by the likes of Rimer, a time when he would have

taken one look at Elfred Jonas and his friends and sent them west ere they had so

much as a single hot dinner in them. But that was before Hart had become

besotted with Lady Delgado's gray eyes. high bosom, and flat belly.

Olive turned down the lamp, blew out the flame, and crept off to bed, where she

would lie wakeful until dawn.

By one o' the clock, no one was left in the public rooms of Mayor's House except

for a quartet of cleaning women, who performed their

chores silent?ly (and

ner?vous?ly) be?neath the eye of El?dred Jonas. When one of them looked up and saw

him gone from the win?dow-seat where he had been sit?ting and smok?ing, she

mur?mured soft?ly to her friends, and they all loos?ened up a lit?tle. But there was no

singing, no laugh?ter. Il spec tra, the man with the blue cof?fin on his hand, might

on?ly have stepped hack in?to the shad?ows. He might still be watch?ing.

By two o' the clock, even the clean?ing wom?en were gone. It was an hour at which

a par?ty in Gilead would just have been reach?ing its apogee of glit?ter and gos?sip,

but Gilead was far away, not just in an?oth?er Barony hut al?most in an?oth?er world.

This was the Out?er Arc, and in the Out?ers, even gen?try went to bed ear?ly.

There was no gen?try on view at the Trav?ellers' Rest, how?ev?er, and be?neath the all-

en?com?pass?ing gaze of The Romp, the night was still fair?ly young.

2

At one end of the sa?loon, fish?er?men still wear?ing their rolled-down boots drank

and played Watch Me for small stakes. To their right was a pok?er ta?ble; to their

left, a knot of yelling, ex?hort?ing men—cow?pokes, most?ly—stood along Sa?tan's

Al?ley, watch?ing the dice bounce down the vel?vet in cline. At the room's oth?er end,

Sheb Mc?Cur?dy was pound?ing out jagged boo?gie, right hand fly?ing, left hand

pump?ing, the sweat pour?ing down his neck and pale cheeks. Be?side and above

him, stand?ing drunk on a stool, Pet?tie the Trot?ter shook her enor?mous bot?tom and

bawled out the words to the song at the top of her voice: "Come on over, ba?by, we

got chick?en in the hum, what hum. whose barn, my burn! Come on over, ba?by,

ba?by got the bull by the horns ..."

Sheemie stopped be?side the pi?ano, the camel buck?et in one hand, grin?ning up at

her and at?tempt?ing to sing along. Pet?tie swat?ted him on his way, nev?er miss?ing a word, bump, or grind, and Sheemie went with his pe?cu?liar laugh, which was shrill but some?how not un?pleas?ant.

A game of darts was in progress; in a booth near the back, a whore who styled

her?self Count?ess Jil?lian of Up?ard Kil?lian (ex?iled roy?al?ty from dis?tant Gar?lan, my

dears, oh how spe?cial we are) was man?ag?ing to give two hand?jobs at the same

time while smok?ing a pipe. And at the bar, a whole line of as?sort?ed toughs,

drifters, cow?punch?ers, drovers, drivers, carters, wheel?wrights, sta?gies, car?pen?ters,

con?men, stock?men, boat?men, and gun?men drank be?neath The Romp's dou?ble head.

The on?ly re?al gun?men in the place were at the end of the bar, a pair drink?ing by

them?selves. No one at?tempt?ed to join them, and not just be cause they wore

shoot?ing irons in hol?sters that were slung low and tied down gun?slinger fash?ion.

Guns were un?com?mon but not un?known in Mejis at that time, and not nec?es?sar?ily

feared, but these two had the sullen look of men who have spent a long day do?ing

work they didn't want to do—the look of men who would pick a fight on no

ac?count at all, and be glad to end their day by send?ing some new wid?ow's hus?band

home in a hur?ry-?up wag?on.

Stan?ley the bar?tender served them whiskey af?ter whiskey with no at tempt to make

con?ver?sa?tion, not so much as a “Hot day, gents, wa'n't it?” They reeked of sweat,

and their hands were pitchy with pine-?gum. Not enough to keep Stan?ley from

be?ing able to see the blue cof?fin-?shapes tat tooed on them, though. Their friend,

the old limp?ing buz?zard with the girl's hair and the gimp leg, wasn't here, at least.

In Stan?ley's view, Jonas was eas?ily the worst of the Big Cof?fin Hunters, but these

two were bad enough, and he had no in?ten?tion of get?ting

aslant of them if he could

help it. With luck, no one would; they looked tired enough to call it a night ear?ly.

Reynolds and De?pape were tired, all right—they had spent the day out at Cit?go,

cam?ou?flag?ing a line of emp?ty steel tankers with non?sense words (tex?aco, cit?go,

suno?co, exxon) print?ed on their sides, a bil?lion pine-?boughs they'd hauled and

stacked, it seemed—but they had no con se?quent plans to fin?ish their drink?ing

ear?ly. De?pape might have done so if Her Nibs had been avail?able, but that young

beau?ty (ac?tu?al name: Gert Mog?gins) had a ranch-?job and wouldn't be back un?til

two nights hence. "And it'll be a week if there's hard cash on of?fer," De?pape said

mo?rose?ly. He pushed his spec?ta?cles up on his nose.

"Fuck her," Reynolds said.

"That's just what I'd do if I could, but I can't."

"I'm go?ing to get me a plate of that free lunch," Reynolds said, point ing down to

the oth?er end of the bar, where a tin buck?et of steamed clams had just come out of

the kitchen. "You want some?"

"Them look like hocks of snot and go down the same way. Bring me a strip of

beef jerky."

"All right, part?ner." Reynolds went off down the bar. Peo?ple gave him wide

pas?sage; gave even his silk-?lined cloak wide pas?sage.

De?pape, more mo?rose than ev?er now that he had thought of Her Nibs gob?bling

cow?boy spareribs out there at the Pi?ano Ranch, downed his drink, winced at the

stench of pine-?gum on his hand, then held his glass out in Stan?ley Ruiz's di?rec?tion.

"Fill this up, you dog!" he shout?ed. A cow?hand lean?ing with his back, butt, and

el?bows against the bar jerked for?ward at the sound of De?pape's bel?low, and that

was all it took to start trou?ble.

Sheemie was bustling to?ward the pass through from which the steam ers had just

ap?peared, now hold?ing the camel buck?et out be?fore him in

both hands. Lat?er,

when the Trav?ellers' be?gan to emp?ty out, his job would be to clean up. For now,

how?ev?er, it was sim?ply to cir?cu?late with the camel buck?et, dump?ing in ev?ery

un?fin?ished drink he found. This com bined elixir end?ed up in a jug be?hind the bar.

The jug was la?belled fair?ly enough—camel piss—and a dou?ble shot could be

ob?tained for three pen nies. It was a drink on?ly for the reck?less or the

im?pe?cu?nious, but a fair num?ber of both passed be?neath the stem gaze of The Romp

each night; Stan?ley rarely had a prob?lem emp?ty?ing the jug. And if it wasn't emp?ty

at the end of the night, why, there was al?ways a fresh night com?ing along. Not to

men?tion a fresh sup?ply of thirsty fools.

But on this oc?ca?sion Sheemie nev?er made it to the Camel Piss jug be hind the end

of the bar. He tripped over the boot of the cow?boy who had jerked for?ward, and

went to his knees with a grunt of sur?prise. The con tents of the buck?et sloshed out

ahead of him, and, fol?low?ing Sa?tan's First Law of Ma?lig?ni?ty—to wit, if the worst

can hap?pen, it usu?al?ly will—they drenched Roy De?pape from the knees down in

an eye wa?ter?ing mix?ture of beer, graf, and white light?ning.

Con?ver?sa?tion at the bar stopped, and that stopped the talk of the men gath?ered

around the dice-?chute. Sheb turned, saw Sheemie kneel?ing be fore one of Jonas's

men, and stopped play?ing. Pet?tie, her eyes squeezed shut as she poured her en?tire

soul in?to her singing, con?tin?ued on a capel?la for three or four bars be?fore

reg?is?ter?ing the si?lence which was spread?ing out like a rip?ple. She stopped singing

and opened her eyes. That sort of si lence usu?al?ly meant that some?one was go?ing

to be killed. If so, she didn't in?tend to miss it.

De?pape stood per?fect?ly still, in?hal?ing the raw stench of al?co?hol as it rose. He didn't

mind the smell; on the whole, it had the stink of pine-?gum beat

six ways to the

Ped?dler. He didn't mind the way his pants were stick ing to his knees, ei?ther. It

might have been a bit of an ir?ri?ta?tion if some of that joy-?juice had got?ten down

in?side his boots, but none had.

His hand fell to the butt of his gun. Here, by god and by god?dess, was some?thing

to take his mind off his sticky hands and ab?sent whore. And good en?ter?tain?ment

was ev?er worth a lit?tle wet?ting.

Si?lence blan?ket?ed the place now. Stan?ley stood as stiff as a sol?dier be hind the bar,

ner?vous?ly pluck?ing at one of his arm-?garters. At the bar's oth?er end, Reynolds

looked back to?ward his part?ner with bright in?ter?est. He took a clam from the

steam?ing buck?et and cracked it on the edge of the bar like a boiled egg. At

De?pape's feet, Sheemie looked up, his eyes big and fear?ful be?neath the wild snarl

of his black hair. He was try?ing his best to smile.

"Well now, boy," De?pape said. "You have wet me con?sid?er?able."

"Sor?ry, big fel?la, I go trip?py-?trip." Sheemie jerked a hand back over his shoul?der; a

lit?tle spray of camel piss flew from the tips of his fin?gers. Some?where some?one

cleared his throat ner?vous?ly—raa-?aach! The room was full of eyes, and qui?et

enough so that they all could hear both the wind in the eaves and the waves

break?ing on the rocks of Ham?bry Point, two miles away.

"The hell you did," said the cow?poke who had jerked. He was about twen?ty, and

sud?den?ly afraid he might nev?er see his moth?er again. "Don't you go tryin to put

your trou?ble off on me, you damned feeb."

"I don't care how it hap?pened," De?pape said. He was aware he was play?ing for an

au?di?ence, and knew that what an au?di?ence most?ly wants is to be en?ter?tained. Sai R.

B. De?pape, al?ways a trouper, in?tend?ed to oblige.

He pinched the cor?duroy of his pants above the knees and pulled the legs up,

re?veal?ing the toes of his boots. They were shiny and wet.

“See there. Look at what you got on my boots.”

Sheemie looked up at him, grin?ning and ter?ri?fied.

Stan?ley Ruiz de?cid?ed he couldn’t let this hap?pen with?out at least try ing to stop it.

He had known Do?lores Sheemer, the boy’s moth?er; there was even a pos?si?bil?ity

that he him?self was the boy’s fa?ther. In any case, he liked Sheemie. The boy was

fool?ish, but his heart was good, he nev?er took a drink, and he al?ways did his work.

Al?so, he could find a smile for you even on the cold?est, fog?gi?est win?ter’s day. That

was a tal?ent many peo?ple of nor?mal in?tel?li?gence did not have.

“Sai De?pape,” he said, tak?ing a step for?ward and speak?ing in a low, re?spect?ful

tone. “I’m very sor?ry about that. I’ll be hap?py to buy your drinks for the rest of the

evening if we can just for?get this re?gret?table—”

De?pape’s move?ment was a blur al?most too fast to see, but that wasn’t what amazed

the peo?ple who were in the Rest that night; they would have ex?pect?ed a man

run?ning with Jonas to be fast. What amazed them was the fact that he nev?er looked

around to set his tar?get. He lo?cat?ed Stan?ley by his voice alone.

De?pape drew his gun and swept it to the right in a ris?ing arc. It struck Stan?ley Ruiz

dead in the mouth, mash?ing his lips and shat?ter?ing three of his teeth. Blood

splashed the back?bar mir?ror; sev?er?al high?fly?ing drops dec?orat?ed the tip of The

Romp’s left?hand nose. Stan?ley screamed, clapped his hands to his face, and

stag?gered back against the shelf be?hind him. In the si?lence, the chat?tery clink of

the bot?tles was very loud.

Down the bar, Reynolds cracked an?oth?er clam and watched, fas?ci nat?ed. Good as a

play, it was.

De?pape turned his at?ten?tion back to the kneel?ing boy. “Clean my boots,” he said.

A look of mud?dled re?lief came on?to Sheemie’s face. Clean his

boots! Yes! You

bet! Right away! He pulled the rag he al?ways kept in his back pock?et. It wasn't

even dirty yet. Not very, at least.

"No," De?pape said pa?tient?ly. Sheemie looked up at him, gap?ing and puz?zled. "Put

that nasty clout back where it come from—I don't even want to look at it."

Sheemie tucked it in?to his back pock?et again.

"Lick em," De?pape said in that same pa?tient voice. "That's what I want. You lick

my boots un?til they're dry again, and so clean you can see your stupid rab?bit's face

in em."

Sheemie hes?itat?ed, as if still not sure what was re?quired of him. Or per?haps he was

on?ly pro?cess?ing the in?for?ma?tion.

"I'd do it, boy," Barkie Calla?han said from what he hoped was a safe place be?hind

Sheb's pi?ano. "If you want to see the sun come up, I'd sure?ly do it."

De?pape had al?ready de?cid?ed the mush-?brain wasn't go?ing to see an oth?er sun?rise,

not in this world, but kept qui?et. He had nev?er had his boots licked. He want?ed to

see what it felt like. If it was nice—kind of sexy-?like—he could maybe try Her

Nibs out on it.

"Does I have to?" Sheemie's eyes were fill?ing with tears. "Can't just I-?sor?ry and

pol?ish em re?al good?"

"Lick, you fee?ble-?mind?ed don?key," De?pape said.

Sheemie's hair fell across his fore?head. His tongue poked ten?ta?tive?ly out be?tween

his lips, and as he bent his head to?ward De?pape's boots, the first of his tears fell.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," a voice said. It was shock?ing in the si?lence— not be?cause

it was sud?den, and cer?tain?ly not be?cause it was an?gry. It was shock?ing be?cause it

was amused. "I sim?ply can't al?low that. Nope. I would if I could, but I can't.

Un?san?itary, you see. Who knows what dis ease might be spread in such fash?ion?

The mind quails! Ab-?so-?lute?ly cuh-?wails!"

Stand?ing just inside the batwing doors was the pur?vey?or of this id?iotic and

po?ten?tial?ly fa?tal screed: a young man of mid?dling height, his flat-?crowned hat

pushed back to re?veal a tum?bled com?ma of brown hair. Except young man didn't

re?al?ly cov?er him, De?pape re?al?ized; young man was draw?ing it heavy. He was on?ly

a kid. Around his neck, gods knew why, he wore a bird's skull like an enor?mous

com?ical pen?dant. It was hung on a chain that ran through the eye?holes. And in his

hands was not a gun (where would an un?whiskered drib?ble like him get a gun in

the first place? De?pape won?dered) but a god?dam sling?shot. De?pape burst out

laugh?ing.

The kid laughed as well, nod?ding as if he un?der?stood how ridicu?lous the whole

thing looked, how ridicu?lous the whole thing was. His laugh?ter was in?fec?tious;

Pet?tie, still up on her stool, tit?tered her?self be?fore clap?ping her hands over her mouth.

"This is no place for a boy such as you," De?pape said. His re?volver, an old five-

shoot?er, was still out; it lay in his fist on the bar, with Stan?ley Ruiz's blood

drip?ping off the gun?sight. De?pape, with?out rais?ing it from the iron?wood, wag?gled

it slight?ly. "Boys who come to places like this learn had habits, kid. Dy?ing is apt to

be one of them. So I give you this one chance. Get out of here."

"Thank you, sir, I ap?pre?ci?ate my one chance," the boy said. He spoke with great

and win?ning sin?cer?ity . . . but didn't move. Still he stood just in?side the batwing

doors, with the wide elas?tic strap of his sling pulled hack. De?pape couldn't quite

make out what was in the cup, but it glit?tered in the gaslight. A met?al ball of some sort.

"Well, then?" De?pape snarled. This was get?ting old, and fast.

"I know I'm be?ing a pain in the neck, sir—not to men?tion an ache in (he ass and a

milky drip from the tip of a sore dick—but if it's all the same to you, my dear

friend, I'd like to give my chance to the young fellow on his knees before you. Let

him apologize, let him polish your boots with his clout until you are entirely

satisfied, and let him go on living his life."

There was an unfocused murmur of approval at this from the area where the card-

players were watching. DePape didn't like the sound of it at all, and he made a

sudden decision. The boy would die as well, executed for the crime of

impertinence. The swabby who had spilled the bucket of dregs on him was clearly

retarded. Yon brat had not even that excuse. He just thought he was funny.

From the corner of his eye, DePape saw Reynolds moving to flank the boy,

smooth as oiled silk. DePape anticipated the thought, but didn't believe he'd need

much help with the sling-shot specialist.

"Boy, I think you've made a mistake," he said in a kindly voice. "I really

believe—" The cup of the sling-shot dipped a little ... or DePape fancied it did. He

made his move.

3

They talked about it in Hambury for years to come; three decades after the fall of

Gilead and the end of the Affiliation, they were still talking. By that time there

were better than five hundred old gaffers (and a few old gamblers) claiming that

they were drinking a beer in the Rest that night, and saw it all.

DePape was young, and had the speed of a snake. Nevertheless, he never came

close to getting a shot off at Cuthbert Allgood. There was a thip-TWANG! as the

elastic was released, a steel gleam that drew itself across the saloon's smoky air

like a line on a slateboard, and then DePape screamed. His revolver tumbled to the

floor, and a foot spun it away from him across the sawdust (no one would claim

that foot while the Big Cof fin Hunters were still in Ham?bry;
hun?dreds claimed it

af?ter they were gone). Still scream?ing—he could not bear pain
—De?pape raised his

bleed ing hand and looked at it with ag?onized, un?be?liev?ing
eyes. Ac?tu?al?ly, he had

been lucky. Cuth?bert's ball had smashed the tip of the sec?ond
fin?ger and torn off

the nail. Low?er, and De?pape would have been able to blow
smoke-?rings through

his own palm.

Cuth?bert, mean?while, had al?ready reload?ed the cup of his
sling?shot and drawn the

elas?tic back again. "Now," he said, "if I have your at?ten tion,
good sir—"

"I can't speak for his," Reynolds said from be?hind him, "but
you got mine, part?ner.

I don't know if you're good with that thing or just shi?tass lucky,
but ei?ther way,

you're done with it now. Re?lax the draw on it and put it down.
That ta?ble in front

of you's the place I want to see it."

"I've been blind?sid?ed," Cuth?bert said sad?ly. "Be?trayed once
more by my own

cal?low youth."

"I don't know noth?ing about your cal?low youth, broth?er, but
you've been

blind?sid?ed, all right," Reynolds agreed. He stood be?hind and
slight?ly to the left of

Cuth?bert, and now he moved his gun for?ward un?til the boy
could feel the muz?zle

against the back of his head. Reynolds thumbed the ham?mer. In
the pool of si?lence

which the Trav?ellers' Rest had be?come, the sound was very
loud. "Now put that

twanger down."

"I think, good sir, that I must of?fer my re?grets and de?cline."

"What?"

"You see, I've got my trusty sling aimed at your pleas?ant
friend's head—" Cuth?bert

be?gan, and when De?pape shift?ed un?easi?ly against the bar,
Cuth?bert's voice rose in

a whipcrack that did not sound cal?low in the least. "Stand still!
Move again and

you 're a dead man!"

De?pape sub?sid?ed, hold?ing his bloody hand against his pine-? tacky shirt. For the

first time he looked fright?ened, and for the first time that night —for the first time

since hook?ing up with Jonas, in fact—Reynolds felt mas?tery of a sit?ua?tion on the

verge of slip?ping away ... ex?cept how could it be? How could it be when he'd been

able to cir?cle around this smart-?talk?ing squint and get the drop on him? This

should be over.

Low?er?ing his voice to its for?mer con?ver?sa?tion?al—not to say play ful—pitch,

Cuth?bert said: "If you shoot me, the ball flies and your friend dies, too."

"I don't be?lieve that," Reynolds said, but he didn't like what he heard in his own

voice. It sound?ed like doubt. "No man could make a shot like that."

"Why don't we let your friend de?cide?" Cuth?bert raised his voice in a good-

hu?mored hail. "Hi-?ho, there, Mr. Spec?ta?cles! Would you like your pal to shoot

me?"

"No!" De?pape's cry was shrill, verg?ing on pan?ic. "No, Clay! Don't

shoot!"

"So it's a stand?off," Reynolds said, be?mused. And then be?muse?ment changed to

hor?ror as he felt the blade of a very large knife slip against his throat. It pressed the

ten?der skin just over his adam's ap?ple.

"No, it's not," Alain said soft?ly. "Put the gun down, my friend, or I'll cut your throat."

4

Stand?ing out?side the batwing doors, hav?ing ar?rived by sim?ple good for tune in

time for this Pinch and Jil?ly show, Jonas watched with amaze ment, con?tempt, and

some?thing close to hor?ror. First one of the Af?fil?ia?tion brats gets the drop on

De?pape, and when Reynolds cov?ers that one, the big kid with the round face and

the plow?boy's shoul?ders puts a knife to Reynolds's throat. Nei?

ther of the brats a

day over fifteen, and neither with a gun. Marvelous. He would have thought it

better than a traveling circus, if not for the problems that would follow if this

were not put right. What sort of work could they do in Hambury if it got around that

the boogeymen were afraid of the children, instead of vice-versa?

There's time to stop this before there's killing, maybe. If you want to. Do you?

Jonas decided he did; that they could walk out winners if they played it just right.

He also decided the Affiliation brats would not, unless they were very lucky

indeed, be leaving Mejis Barony alive.

Where's the other one? Dearborn?

A good question. An important question. Embarrassment would be come out right

humiliation if he found himself trumped in the same fashion as Roy and Clay.

Dearborn wasn't in the bar, and that was sure. Jonas turned on his heels, scanning

the South High Street in both directions. It was almost day-bright under a Kissing

Moon only two nights past the full. No one there, not in the street, not on the far

side, where Hambury's mercantile store stood. The mercantile had a porch, but there

was nothing on it save for a line of carved totems illustrating Guardians of the

Beam: Bear, Turtle, Fish, Eagle, Lion, Bat, and Wolf. Seven of twelve, bright as

marble in the moonlight, and no doubt great favorites of the kiddies. No men over

there, though. Good. Lovely.

Jonas peered hard into the thread of alley between the mercantile and the

butcher's, glimpsed a shadow behind a tumble of cast-off boxes, tensed, then

relaxed as he saw a cat's shining green eyes. He nodded and turned to the business

at hand, pushing back the left-hand batwing and stepping in to the Travellers' Rest.

Alain heard the squeak of a hinge, but Jonas's gun was at his

tem?ple be?fore he

could even be?gin to turn.

“Son?ny, un?less you’re a bar?ber, I think you’d bet?ter put that pig?stick?er down. You

don’t get a sec?ond warn?ing.”

“No,” Alain said.

Jonas, who had ex?pect?ed noth?ing but com?pli?ance and had been pre?pared for

noth?ing else, was thun?der?struck. “What? ”

“You heard me,” Alain said. “I said no.”

5

Af?ter mak?ing their man?ners and ex?cus?ing them?selves from Seafront, Roland had

left his friends to their own amuse?ments—they would fin?ish up at the Trav?ellers’

Rest, he sup?posed, but wouldn’t stay long or get in?to much trou?ble when they had

no mon?ey for cards and could drink noth?ing more ex?cit?ing than cold tea. He had

rid?den in?to town an?oth?er way, teth?ered his mount at a pub?lic post in the low?er of

the two town squares (Rush?er had of?fered a sin?gle puz?zled nick?er at this treat?ment,

but no more), and had since been tramp?ing the emp?ty, sleep?ing streets with his hat

yanked low over his eyes and his hands clasped in?to an aching knot at the small of

his back.

His mind was full of ques?tions—things were wrong here, very wrong. At first he’d

thought that was just his imag?ina?tion, the child?ish part of him find?ing make-

be?lieve trou?bles and sto?ry?book in?trigue be?cause he had been re?moved from the

heart of the re?al ac?tion. But af?ter his talk with “Ren?nie” Ren?frew, he knew bet?ter.

There were ques?tions, out?right mys?ter?ies, and the most hellish thing of all was

that he couldn’t con?cen?trate on them, let alone go any dis?tance to?ward mak?ing

sense of them. Ev?ery time he tried, Su?san Del?ga?do’s face in?trud?ed ... her face, or

the sweep of her hair, or even the pret?ty, fear?less way her silk?-?slip?pered feet had

fol?lowed his boots in the dance, nev?er lag?ging or hes?itat?

ing. Again and again he

heard the last thing he had said to her, speak?ing in the stilt?ed, prig?gish voice of a

boy preach?er. He would have giv?en al?most any?thing to take back both the tone and

the words them?selves. She'd be on Thorin's pil?low come Reap-?tide, and kin?dle him

a child be?fore the first snow flew, per haps a male heir, and what of it? Rich men,

fa?mous men, and well-?blood?ed men had tak?en gilly-?girls since the be?gin?ning of

time; Arthur Eld had had bet?ter than forty him?self, ac?cord?ing to the tales. So,

re?al?ly, what was it to him?

I think I've gone and fall?en in love with her. That's what it is to me.

A dis?may?ing idea, but not a dis?mis?si?ble one; he knew the land?scape of his own

heart too well. He loved her, very like?ly it was so, but part of him al?so hat?ed her,

and held to the shock?ing thought he'd had at din?ner: that he could have shot Su?s?san

Del?ga?do through the heart if he'd come armed. Some of this was jeal?ousy, but not

all; per?haps not even the greater part. He had made some in?de?fin?able but pow?er?ful

con?nec?tion be tween Olive Thorin—her sad but game lit?tle smile from the foot of

the ta?ble—and his own moth?er. Hadn't some of that same woe?ful, rue?ful look been

in his moth?er's eyes on the day when he had come up?on her and his fa?ther's

ad?vi?sor? Marten in an open-?throat?ed shirt, Gabrielle De?schain in a sacque that had

slipped off one shoul?der, the whole room reek?ing of what they had been up to that

hot morn?ing?

His mind, tough as it al?ready was, shrank from the im?age, hor?ri?fied. It re?turned

in?stead to that of Su?s?san Del?ga?do—her gray eyes and shin?ing hair. He saw her

laugh?ing, chin up?tilt?ed, hands clasped be?fore the sap phire Thorin had giv?en her.

Roland could for?give her the gilly busi?ness, he sup?posed. What he could not

for?give, in spite of his at?trac?tion to Su?san, was that aw?ful smile on Olive Thorin's

face as she watched the girl sit?ting in what should have been her place. Sit?ting in her place and laugh?ing.

These were the things that chased through his head as he paced off acres of

moon?light. He had no busi?ness with such thoughts, Su?san Del ga?do was not the

rea?son he was here, nor was the ridicu?lous knuck?le-crack?ing May?or and his

pitiab?le coun?try-woman of a wife . . . yet he couldn't put them away and get to what

was his busi?ness. He had for?got ten the face of his fa?ther, and walked in the

moon?light, hop?ing to find it again.

In such fash?ion he came along the sleep?ing, sil?ver-gild?ed High Street, walk?ing

north to south, think?ing vague?ly that he would per?haps stand Cuth?bert and Alain to

a taste of some?thing wet and toss the dice down Sa?tan's Al?ley a time or two be?fore

go?ing back to get Rush?er and call it a night. And so it was that he hap?pened to spy

Jonas—the man's gaunt fig?ure and fall of long white hair were im?pos?si?ble to

mis?take—stand?ing out?side the batwings of the Trav?ellers' Rest and peer?ing in.

Jonas did this with one hand on the butt of his gun and a tense set of body that put

ev?ery?thing else from Roland's mind at once. Some?thing was go?ing on, and if Bert

and Alain were in there, it might in?volve them. They were the strangers in town,

af?ter all, and it was pos?si?ble—even like?ly—that not ev?ery?one in Ham?bry loved the

Af?fil?ia?tion with the fer?vor that had been pro?fessed at tonight's din?ner. Or per?haps

it was Jonas's friends who were in trou?ble. Some?thing was brew?ing, in any case.

With no clear thought as to why he was do?ing it, Roland went soft?ly up the steps

to the mer?can?tile's porch. There was a line of carved an?imals there (and prob?ably

spiked firm?ly to the boards, so that drunk?en wags from the sa?

loon across the street

couldn't carry them away, chanting the nursery rhymes of their childhood as they

went). Roland stepped behind the last one in line—it was the Bear—and bent his

knees so that the crown of his hat wouldn't show. Then he went as still as the

carving. He could see Jonas turn, look across the street, then look to his left,

peering at something—

Very low, a sound: Waow! Waow!

It's a cat. In the alley.

Jonas looked a moment longer, then stepped into the Rest. Roland was out from

behind the carved bear, down the steps, and into the street at once. He hadn't

Alain's gift of the touch, but he had intuitions that were sometimes very strong.

This one was telling him he must hurry.

Overhead, the Kissing Moon drifted behind a cloud.

6

Petite the Trotter still stood on her stool, but she no longer felt drunk and singing

was the last thing on her mind. She could hardly believe what she was seeing:

Jonas had the drop on a boy who had the drop on Reynolds who had the drop on

another boy (this last one wearing a bird's skull around his neck on a chain) who

had the drop on Roy DePape. Who had, in fact, drawn some of Roy DePape's

blood. And when Jonas had told the big boy to put down the knife he was holding

to Reynolds's throat, the big boy had refused.

You can blow my lights out and send me to the clearing at the end of the path,

thought Petite, for now I've seen it all, so I have. She supposed she should get off

the stool—there was apt to be shooting any second now, and likely a great lot of

it—but sometimes you just had to take your chances.

Because some things were just too good to miss.

7

"We're in this town on Affiliation business," Alain said. He had one hand buried

deep in Reynolds's sweaty hair; the other main?tained a steady pres?sure on the knife

at Reynolds's throat. Not quite enough to break the skin. "If you harm us, the

Af?fil?ia?tion will take note. So will our fa?thers. You'll be hunt?ed like dogs and hung

up?side down, like as not, when you're caught."

"Son?ny, there's not an Af?fil?ia?tion pa?trol with?in two hun?dred wheels of here,

prob?ably three hun?dred," Jonas said, "and I wouldn't care a fart in a wind?storm if

there was one just over yon hill. Nor do your fa?thers mean a squit?ter to me. Put

that knife down or I'll blow your fuck?ing brains out."

"No."

"Fu?ture de?vel?op?ments in this mat?ter should be quite won?der?ful," Cuth?bert said

cheer?ily . . . al?though there was now a beat of nerves un?der his prat?tle. Not fear,

per?haps not even ner?vous-?ness, just nerves. The good kind, more like?ly than not,

Jonas thought sourly. He had un?der?es?ti?mat?ed these boys at meat; if noth?ing else

was clear, that was. "You shoot Richard, and Richard cuts Mr. Cloak's throat just

as Mr. Cloak shoots me; my poor dy?ing fin?gers re?lease my sling's elas?tic and put a

steel ball in what pass?es for Mr. Spec?ta?cles's brain. You'll walk away, at least, and

I sup?pose that will be a great com?fort to your dead friends."

"Call it a draw," Alain said to the man with the gun at his tem?ple.

"We all stand back and walk away."

"No, son?ny," Jonas said. His voice was pa?tient, and he didn't think his anger

showed, but it was ris?ing. Gods, to be out?faced like this, even tem?porar?ily! "No

one does like that to the Big Cof?fin Hunters. This is your last chance to—"

Some?thing hard and cold and very much to the point pressed against the back of

Jonas's shirt, dead cen?ter be?tween the shoul?derblades. He knew what it was and

who held it at once, un?der?stood the game was lost, but couldn't un?der?stand how

such a lu?di?crous, mad?den?ing turn of events could have hap?pened.

"Hol?ster the gun," the voice be?hind the sharp tip of met?al said. It was emp?ty,

some?how—not just calm, but emo?tion?less. "Do it now, or this goes in your heart.

No more talk. Talk?ing's done. Do it or die."

Jonas heard two things in that voice: youth and truth. He bol?stered his gun.

"You with the black hair. Take your gun out of my friend's ear and put it back in

your hol?ster. Now."

Clay Reynolds didn't have to be in?vit?ed twice, and he ut?tered a long, shaky sigh

when Alain took the blade off his throat and stood back. Cuth?bert did not look

around, on?ly stood with the elas?tic of his sling?shot pulled and his el?bow cocked.

"You at the bar," Roland said. "Hol?ster up."

De?pape did so, gri?mac?ing with pain as he bumped his hurt fin?ger against his

gun?belt. On?ly when this gun was put away did Cuth?bert re lax his hold on his

sling and drop the ball from the cup in?to the palm of his hand.

The cause of all this had been for?got?ten as the ef?fects played them selves out. Now

Sheemie got to his feet and pelt?ed across the room. His cheeks were wet with

tears. He grasped one of Cuth?bert's hands, kissed it sev?er?al times (loud smack?ing

nois?es that would have been com?ic un?der oth?er cir?cum?stances), and held the hand

to his cheek for a mo?ment. Then he dodged past Reynolds, pushed open the

right?hand batwing, and flew right in?to the arms of a sleepy?eyed and still half-

drunk Sher?iff. Av?ery had been fetched by Sheb from the jail?house, where the

Sher?iff o' Barony had been sleep?ing off the May?or's cer?emo?ni?al din?ner in one of

his own cells.

8

"This is a nice mess, isn't it?"

Av?ery speak?ing. No one an?swer?ing. He hadn't ex?pect?ed they would, not if they

knew what was good for them.

The office area of the jail was too small to hold three men, three strap ping not-

quite-men, and one extra-large Sheriff comfortably, so Avery had herded them

into the nearby Town Gathering Hall, which echoed to the soft flutter of the

pi geons in the rafters and the steady beat-beat-beat of the grandfather clock behind

the podium.

It was a plain room, but an inspired choice all the same. It was where the

townsfolk and Barony landowners had come for hundreds of years to make their

decisions, pass their laws, and occasionally send some especially troublesome

person west. There was a feeling of seriousness in its moon-glimmered darkness,

and Roland thought even the old man, Jonas, felt a little of it. Certainly it invested

Sheriff Herk Avery with an authority he might not otherwise have been able to

project.

The room was filled with what were in that place and time called "bareback

benches"—oaken pews with no cushions for either butt or back. There were sixty

in all, thirty on each side of a wide center aisle. Jonas, De pape, and Reynolds sat

on the front bench to the left of the aisle. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain sat across

from them on the right. Reynolds and De pape looked sullen and embarrassed;

Jonas looked remote and composed. Will Dearborn's little crew was quiet. Roland

had given Cuthbert a look which he hoped the boy could read: One smart remark

and I'll rip the tongue right out of your head. He thought the message had been

received. Bert had stowed his idiotic "lookout" somewhere, which was a good

sign.

"A nice mess," Avery repeated, and blew liquor-scented wind at them in a deep

sigh. He was sitting on the edge of the stage with his short legs

hang?ing down,

look?ing at them with a kind of dis?gust?ed won?der.

The side door opened and in came Deputy Dave, his white ser?vice jack?et laid

aside, his mon?ocle tucked in?to the pock?et of his more usu?al kha?ki shirt. In one

hand he car?ried a mug; in the oth?er a fold?ed scrap of what looked to Roland like

birch-?bark.

“Did ye boil the first half, David?” Av?ery asked. He now wore a put-?up?on

ex?pres?ion.

“Aye.”

“Boiled it twice?”

“Aye, twice.”

“For that was the di?rec?tions.”

“Aye,” Dave re?peat?ed in a re?signed voice. He hand?ed Av?ery the cup and dumped

the re?main?ing con?tents of the birch-?bark scrap in when the Sher?iff held the cup out

for them.

Av?ery swirled the liq?uid, peered in with a doubt?ful, re?signed ex?pres sion, then

drank. He gri?maced. “Oh, foul!” he cried. “What’s so nasty as this?”

“What is it?” Jonas asked.

“Headache pow?der. Hang?over pow?der, ye might say. From the old witch. The one

who lives up the Coos. Know where I mean?” Av?ery gave Jonas a know?ing look.

The old gun?ny pre?tend?ed not to see it, but Roland thought he had. And what did it

mean? An?oth?er mys?tery.

De?pape looked up at the word Coos, then went back to suck?ing his wound?ed

fin?ger. Be?yond De?pape, Reynolds sat with his cloak drawn about him, look?ing

grim?ly down at his lap.

“Does it work?” Roland asked.

“Aye, boy, but ye pay a price for witch’s medicine. Re?mem?ber that: ye al?ways pay.

This ‘un takes away the headache if ye drink too much of May?or Thorin’s damned

punch, but it gripes the bow?els some?thin fierce, so it does. And the farts—!” He

He waved a hand in front of his face to demonstrate, took another sip from the cup,

then set it aside. He returned to his former gravity, but the mood in the room had

lightened just a little; they all felt it. "Now what are we to do about this business?"

Herk Avery swept them slowly with his eyes, from Reynolds on his far right to

Alain—"Richard Stockworth"—on his far left. "Eh, boys? We've got the Mayor's

men on one side and the Affiliation's . . . men . . . on the other, six fellows at the

point of murder, and over what? A halfwit and a spilled bucket of slops." He

pointed first at the Big Coffin Hunters, then to the Affiliation's counters. "Two

powderkegs and one fat sheriff in the middle. So what's your thoughts on that? Speak

up, don't be shy, you wasn't shy in Coral's whorehouse down the road, don't be shy

in here!"

No one said anything. Avery sipped some more of his foul drink, then set it down

and looked at them decisively. What he said next didn't surprise Roland much; it

was exactly what he would have expected of a man like Avery, right down to the

tone which implied that he considered himself a man who could make the hard

decisions when he had to, by the gods.

"I'll tell you what we're going to do: We're going to forget it."

He now assumed the air of one who expects an uproar and is prepared to handle it.

When no one spoke or even shuffled a foot, he looked discomfited. Yet he had a

job to do, and the night was growing old. He squared his shoulders and pushed on.

"I'll not spend the next three or four months waiting to see who among you's killed

who. Nay! Nor will I be put in a position where I might have to take the

punishment for your stupid quarrel over that halfwit Sheemie.

"I appeal to your practical natures, boys, when I point out that I may be either your

friend or your enemy during your time here . . . but I'd be wrong if I didn't also

appeal to your more noble natures, which I am sure are both large and sensitive."

The Sheriff now tried on an altered expression, which was not, in Roland's

estimation, notably successful. Avery turned his attention to Jonas.

"Sai, I can't believe you'll want to be cousin trouble for three young men from the

Affiliation—the Affiliation that's been like mother's milk and father's shelterin

hand since aye or oh fifty generations back; you'd not be so disrespectful as all that,

would you?"

Jonas shook his head, smiling his thin smile.

Avery nodded again. Things were going along well, that nod said. "You've all your

own cakes to bake and oats to roll, and none of you wants something like this to get

in the way of doing your jobs, do you?"

They all shook their heads this time.

"So what I want you to do is to stand up, face each other, shake hands, and cry

each other's pardon. If you don't do that, you can all ride west out of town by sunrise,

far as I'm concerned."

He picked up the mug and took a bigger drink this time. Roland saw that the man's

hand was trembling the tiniest bit, and wasn't surprised. It was all bluff and blow,

of course. The Sheriff would have understood that Jonas, Reynolds, and DePape

were beyond his authority as soon as he saw the small blue coffins on their hands;

after tonight, he must feel the same way about Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath.

He could only hope that all would see where their self-interest lay. Roland did. So,

apparently, did Jonas, for even as Roland got up, Jonas did the same.

Avery recoiled a little bit, as if expecting Jonas to go for his gun and Dearborn for

the knife in his belt, the one he'd been holding against Jonas's back when Avery

came puffing up to the saloon.

There was no gun or knife drawn, however. Jonas turned toward Roland and held out his hand.

"He's right, lad," Jonas said in his ready, quavering voice.

"Yes."

"Will you shake with an old man, and vow to start over?"

"Yes." Roland held out his hand.

Jonas took it. "I cry your pardon."

"I cry your own, Mr. Jonas." Roland tapped left-hand at his throat, as was proper

when addressing an elder in such fashion.

As the two of them sat down, Alain and Reynolds rose, as neatly as men in a

prehearsed ceremony. Last of all, Cuthbert and Depape rose. Roland was all but

positive that Cuthbert's foolishness would pop out like Jack from his box—the

idiot would simply not be able to help himself, although he must surely realize

that Depape was no man to make sport of tonight.

"Cry your pardon," Bert said, with an admirable lack of laughter in his voice.

"Cryerown," Depape mumbled, and held out his bloodstreaked hand. Roland had a

nightmare vision of Bert squeezing down on it as hard as he could, making the

redhead yowl like an owl on a hot stove, but Bert's grip was as restrained as his

voice.

Avory sat on the edge of the stage with his pudgy legs hanging down, watching it

all with avuncular good cheer. Even Deputy Dave was smiling.

"Now I propose to shake hands with yer all myself, 'n then send yer on yer ways,

for the hour's late, so it is, and such as me needs my beauty rest." He chuckled,

and again looked uncomfortable when no one joined in. But he slipped off the

stage and began to shake hands, doing so with the enthusiasm of a minister who

has finally succeeded in marrying a headstrong couple after a long and stormy

courtship.

When they stepped outside, the moon was down and the first lightening in the sky

had begun to show at the far edge of the Clean Sea. "Maybe we'll meet again,

sai," Jonas said. "Maybe we will," Roland said, and swung up into his saddle.

10

The Big Coffin Hunters were staying in the watchman's house about a mile south

of Seafront—five miles out of town, this was.

Halfway there, Jonas stopped at a turnout beside the road. From here the land

made a steep, rocky descent to the brightening sea.

"Get down, mister," he said. It was Deppa he was looking at.

"Jonas...Jonas, I..."

"Get down."

Bitting his lip nervously, Deppa got down.

"Take off your spectacles."

"Jonas, what's this about? I don't—"

"Or if you want em broke, leave em on. It's all the same to me."

Bitting his lip harder now, Deppa took off his gold-rimmed spectacles. They

were barely in his hand before Jonas had fetched him a terrific clip on the side of

the head. Deppa cried out and reeled toward the drop. Jonas drove forward,

moving as fast as he had struck, and seized him by the shirt just before he went

tumbling over the edge. Jonas twisted his hand into the shirt material and yanked

Deppa toward him. He breathed deep, inhaling the scent of pine-tar and Deppa's sweat.

"I ought to toss you right over the edge," he breathed. "Do you know how much

harm you've done?"

"I... Jonas, I never meant... just a little fun is all I... how was we supposed to know

they ..."

Slowly, Jonas's hand relaxed. That last bit of babble had gone home. How was

they supposed to know, that was ungrammatical but right. And if not for tonight,

they might not have known. If you looked at it that way, De? pape had ac?tu?al?ly done

them a fa?vor. The dev?il you knew was al?ways prefer?able to the dev?il you didn't.

Still, word would get around, and peo ple would laugh. Maybe even that was all

right, though. The laugh?ter would stop in due time.

"Jonas, I cry your par?don."

"Shut up," Jonas said. In the east, the sun would short?ly heave it?self over the

hori?zon, cast?ing its first gleams on a new day in this world of toil and sor?row. "I

ain't go?ing to toss you over, be?cause then I'd have to toss Clay over and fol?low

along my?self. They got the drop on us the same as you, right?"

De?pape want?ed to agree, but thought it might be dan?ger?ous to do so. He was

pru?dent?ly silent.

"Get down here, Clay."

Clay slid off his mount.

"Now hun?ker."

The three of them hun?kered on their boot?soles, heels up. Jonas plucked a shoot of

grass and put it be?tween his lips. "Af?fil?ia?tion brats is what we were told, and we

had no rea?son not to be?lieve it," he said. "The bad boys are sent all the way to

Mejis, a sleepy Barony on the Clean Sea, on a make-?work de?tail that's two pans

penance and three parts pun?ish ment. Ain't that what we were told?"

They nod?ded.

"Ei?ther of you be?lieve it af?ter tonight?"

De?pape shook his head. So did Clay.

"They may be rich boys, but that's not all they are," De?pape said. "The way they

were tonight . . . they were like . . ." He trailed off, not quite will?ing to fin?ish the

thought. It was too ab?surd.

Jonas was will?ing. "They act?ed like gun?slingers."

Nei?ther Jonas nor Reynolds replied at first. Then Clay Reynolds said, "They're too

young, El?dred. Too young by years."

"Not too young to be 'pren?tices, may?hap. In any case, we're go?ing to find out." He

turned to De?pape. "You've got some rid?ing to do, cul?ly."

"Aww, Jonas—!"

"None of us ex?act?ly cov?ered our?selves with glo?ry, but you were the fool that

start?ed the pot boil?ing." He looked at De?pape, but De?pape on?ly looked down at the

ground be?tween them. "You're go?ing to ride their back?trail, Roy, and you're go?ing

to ask ques?tions un?til you've got the an swers you think will sat?is?fy my cu?rios?ity.

Clay and I are most?ly go?ing to wait. And watch. Play Cas?tles with em, if you like.

When I feel like enough time's gone by for us to be able to do a lit?tle snoop?ing

with?out be ing trigged, may?hap we'll do it."

He bit on the piece of grass in his mouth. The larg?er piece tum?bled out and lay

be?tween his boots.

"Do you know why I shook his hand? That boy Dear?born's damned hand? Be?cause

we can't rock the boat, boys. Not just when it's edg?ing in to?ward har?bor. Lati?go

and the folks we've been wait?ing for will be mov ing to?ward us very soon, now.

Un?til they get in?to these parts, it's in our in?ter?est to keep the peace. But I tell you

this: no one puts a knife to El?dred Jonas's back and lives. Now lis?ten, Roy. Don't

make me tell you any of this twice."

Jonas be?gan to speak, lean?ing for?ward over his knees to?ward De?pape as he did.

Af?ter awhile, De?pape be?gan to nod. He might like a lit?tle trip, ac?tu?al?ly. Af?ter the

re?cent com?edy in the Trav?ellers' Rest, a change of air might be just the tick?et.

11

The boys were al?most back to the Bar K and the sun was com?ing over the hori?zon

be?fore Cuth?bert broke the si?lence. "Well! That was an amus?ing and in?struc?tive

evening, was it not?" Nei?ther Roland nor Alain replied, so Cuth?bert leaned over to

the rook's skull, which he had re?turned to its for mer place on the horn of his

sad?dle. "What say you, old friend? Did we en?joy our evening?

Dinner, a circle-

dance, and almost killed to top things off. Did you enjoy?"

The lookout only stared ahead of Cuthbert's horse with its great dark eyes.

"He says he's too tired to talk," Cuthbert said, then yawned.

"So'm I, ac'tually." He

looked at Roland. "I got a good look into Mr. Jonas's eyes after he shook hands

with you, Will. He means to kill you."

Roland nodded.

"They mean to kill all of us," Alain said.

Roland nodded again. "We'll make it hard for them, but they know more about us

now than they did at dinner. We'll not get behind them that way again."

He stopped, just as Jonas had stopped not three miles from where they now were.

Only instead of looking directly out over the Clean Sea, Roland and his friends

were looking down the long slope of the Drop. A herd of horses was moving from

west to east, barely more than shadows in this light.

"What do you see, Roland?" Alain asked, almost timidly.

"Trouble," Roland said, "and in our road." Then he giggled his horse and rode on.

Before they got back to the Bar K bunkhouse, he was thinking about Susan again.

Five minutes after he dropped his head on his flat burlap pillow, he was dreaming

of her.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE DROP

1

Three weeks had passed since the welcoming dinner at Mayor's House and the

incident at the Travellers' Rest. There had been no more trouble between Roland's

ka-tet and Jonas's. In the night sky, the Kiss Moon had waned and the Peddler's Moon

had made its first thin appearance. The days were bright and warm; even the

old timers admitted it was one of the most beautiful summers in memory.

On a mid-morning as beautiful as any that summer, Susan Delgado galloped a two-

year-?old rosil?lo named Py?lon north along the Drop. The wind dried the tears on

her cheeks and yanked her un?bound hair out be hind her as she went. She urged

Py?lon to go faster yet, light?ly thump?ing his sides with her spur?less boots. Py?lon

turned it up a notch at once, ears flat?ten?ing, tail flag?ging. Su?san, dressed in jeans

and the fad?ed, over?sized kha?ki shirt (one of her da's) that had caused all the

trou?ble, leaned over the light prac?tice sad?dle, hold?ing to the horn with one hand

and rub?bing the oth?er down the side of the horse's strong, silky neck.

"More!" she whis?pered. "More and faster! Go on, boy!"

Py?lon let it out yet an?oth?er notch. That he had at least one more in him she knew;

that he had even one more be?yond that she sus?pect?ed.

They sped along the Drop's high?est ridge, and she bare?ly saw the mag?nif?icent

slope of land be?low her, all green and gold, or the way it fad?ed in?to the blue haze

of the Clean Sea. On any oth?er day the view and the cool, salt-?smelling breeze

would have up?lift?ed her. To?day she on?ly want?ed to hear the steady low thun?der of

Py?lon's hoofs and feel the flex of his mus?cles be?neath her; to?day she want?ed to

out?run her own thoughts.

And all be?cause she had come down?stairs this morn?ing dressed for rid?ing in one of

her fa?ther's old shirts.

2

Aunt Cord had been at the stove, wrapped in her dress?ing gown and with her hair

still net?ted. She dished her?self up a bowl of oat?meal and brought it to the ta?ble.

Su?san had known things weren't good as soon as her aunt I timed to?ward her, bowl

in hand; she could see the dis?con?tent?ed twitch of Aunt Cord's lips, and the

dis?ap?prov?ing glance she shot at the or?ange Su san was peel?ing. Her aunt was still

ran?kled by the sil?ver and gold she had ex?pect?ed to have in hand by now, coins

which would be with?held yet awhile due to the witch's prank?
ish de?cree that Su?san

should re?main a vir gin un?til au?tumn.

But that wasn't the main thing, and Su?san knew it. Quite sim?
ply put, the two of

them had had enough of each oth?er. The mon?ey was on?ly
one of Aunt Cord's

dis?ap?point?ed ex?pec?ta?tions; she had count?ed on hav?ing
the house at the edge of the

Drop to her?self this sum?mer . . . ex?cept, per?haps, (or the oc?
ca?sion?al vis?it from Mr.

El?dred Jonas, with whom Cordelia seemed quite tak?en. In?
stead, here they still

were, one wom?an grow?ing to?ward the end of her cours?es,
thin, dis?ap?prov?ing lips

in a thin, dis?ap?prov?ing face, tiny ap?ple-?breasts un?der her
high-?necked dress?es with

their chok?er col?lars (The Neck, she fre?quent?ly told Su?san,
is the First Thing to

Go), her hair los?ing its for?mer chest?nut shine and show?ing
wire-?threads of gray;

the oth?er young, in?tel?li?gent, ag?ile, and round?ing to?ward
the peak of her physi cal

beau?ty. They grat?ed against each oth?er, each word seem?ing
to pro?duce a spark, and

that was not sur?pris?ing. The man who had loved them both
enough to make them

love each oth?er was gone.

"Are ye go?ing out on that horse?" Aunt Cord had said, putting
her bowl down and

sit?ting in a shaft of ear?ly sun. It was a bad lo?ca?tion, one she
nev?er would have

al?lowed her?self to be caught in had Mr. Jonas been in at?ten?
dance. The strong light

made her face look like a carved mask. There was a cold-?sore
grow?ing at one

cor?ner oth?er mouth; she al?ways got them when she was not
sleep?ing well.

"Aye," Su?san said.

"Ye should eat more'n that, then. 'Twon't keep ye til nine o' the
clock, girl."

"It'll keep me fine," Su?san had replied, eat?ing the sec?tions of
or?ange faster. She

could see where this was tend?ing, could see the look of dis?like
and dis?ap?proval in

her aunt's eyes, and wanted to get away from the table before trouble could begin.

"Why not let me get ye a dish of this?" Aunt Cord asked, and plopped her spoon

into her oatmeal. To Susan it sounded like a horse's hoof stamping down in

mud—or shit—and her stomach clenched. "It'll hold ye to lunch, if ye plan to ride

so long. I suppose a fine young lady such as yerself can't be bothered with

chores—"

"They're done." And you know they're done, she did not add. I did em while you

were sitting before your glass, poking at that sore on your mouth.

Aunt Cord dropped a chunk of creamy butter into her muck—Susan had no idea

how the woman stayed so thin, really she didn't—and watched it begin to melt.

For a moment it seemed that breakfast might end on a reasonably civilized note,

after all.

Then the shirt business had begun.

"Before ye go out, Susan, I want ye to take off that rag you're wearing and put on

one of the new riding blouses Thorin sent ye week before last. It's the least ye can

do to show yer—"

Anything her aunt might have said past that point would have been lost in anger

even if Susan hadn't interrupted. She passed a hand down the sleeve of her shirt,

loving its texture—it was almost velvet from so many washings. "This rag

belonged to my father!"

"Aye, Pat's." Aunt Cord sniffed. "It's too big for ye, and worn out, and not proper,

in any case. When you were young it was maybe all right to wear a man's button-

shirt, but now that ye have a woman's bustline ..."

The riding blouses were on hangers in the corner; they had come four days ago

and Susan hadn't even deigned to take them up to her room. There were three of

them, one red, one green, one blue, all silk, all undoubtedly

worth a small for? tune.

She loathed their pre?ten?sion, and the overblown, blushy-?frilly look of them: full

sleeves to flut?ter ar?tis?ti?cal?ly in the wind, great flop?py fool?ish col?lars . . . and, of

course, the low-?scooped fronts which were prob?ably all Thorin would see if she

ap?peared be?fore him dressed in one. As she wouldn't, if she could pos?si?bly help it.

"My 'wom?an's bust-?line,' as you call it, is of no in?ter?est to me and can't pos?si?bly be

of any in?ter?est to any?one else when I'm out rid?ing," Su san said.

"Per?haps, per?haps not. If one of the Barony's drovers should see you—even

Ren?nie, he's out that way all the time, as ye well know—it wouldn't hurt for him to

men?tion to Hart that he saw yer wear?ing one of the camisas that he so kind?ly gave

to ye. Now would it? Why do ye have lo he such a stiffkins, girl? Why al?ways so

un?will?ing, so un?fair?"

"What does it mat?ter to ye, one way or t'oth?er?" Su?san had asked. "Ye have the

mon?ey, don't ye? And ye'll have more yet. Af?ter he fucks me."

Aunt Cord, her face white and shocked and fu?ri?ous, had leaned across the ta?ble

and slapped her. "How dare thee use that word in my house, ye mal?habla?da? How

dare ye?"

That was when her tears be?gan to flow—at hear?ing her call it her house. "It was

my fa?ther's house! His and mine! Ye were all on yer own with no re?al place to go,

ex?cept per?haps to the Quar?ters, and he took ye in! He took ye in, Aunt!"

The last two or?ange sec?tions were still in her hand. She threw them in?to her aunt's

face, then pushed her?self back from the ta?ble so vi?olent?ly that her chair tot?tered,

tipped, and spilled her to the floor. Her aunt's shad?ow fell over her. Su?san crawled

fran?ti?cal?ly out of it, her hair hang?ing, her slapped cheek throb?bing, her eyes

burn?ing with tears, her throat swelled and hot. At last she

found her feet.

"Ye ungrateful girl," her aunt said. Her voice was soft and so full of venom it was

almost caressing. "After all I have done for thee, and all Hart Thorin has done for

thee. Why, the very nag ye mean to ride this morning was Hart's gift of respect

to—"

"PYLON WAS OURS!" she shrieked, almost madened with fury at this deliberate

blurring of the truth. "ALL OF THEM WERE! THE HORSES, THE LAND—THEY

WERE OURS! "

"Lower thy voice," Aunt Cord said.

Susan took a deep breath and tried to find some control. She swept her hair back

from her face, revealing the red print of Aunt Cord's hand on her cheek. Cordelia

flinched a little at the sight of it.

"My father never would have allowed this," Susan said. "He never would have

allowed me to go as Hart Thorin's gilly. Whatever he might have felt about Hart as

the Mayor ... or as his patrono ... he never would have allowed this. And ye know

it. Thee knows it."

Aunt Cord rolled her eyes, then twirled a finger around her ear as if Susan had

gone mad. "Thee agreed to it yourself, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Aye, so ye

did. And if yer girlish megrims now cause ye to want to cry off what's been

done—"

"Aye," Susan agreed. "I agreed to the bargain, so I did. After ye'd dunned me

about it day and night, after ye'd come to me in tears—"

"I never did!" Cordelia cried, stung.

"Have ye forgotten so quick. Aunt? Aye, I suppose. As by tonight ye'll have

forgotten slapping me at breakfast. Well, I haven't forgotten. Thee cried, all right,

cried and told me ye feared we might be turned off the land, since we had no more

legal right to it, that we'd be on the road, thee wept and said —"

"Stop call?ing me that!" Aunt Cord shout?ed. Noth?ing on earth
mad dened her so
much as hav?ing her own thees and thous turned back at her.
"Thee has no more
right to the old tongue than thee has to thy stupid sheep's com?
plaints! Go on! Get
out!"

But Su?sans went on. Her rage was at the flood and would not be
turned aside.

"Thee wept and said we'd be turned out, turned west, that we'd
nev?er see my da's

home?stead or Ham?bry again . . . and then, when I was fright
ened enough, ye

talked of the cun?ning lit?tle ba?by I'd have. The land that was
ours to be?gin with

giv?en back again. The hors?es that were ours like wise giv?en
back. As a sign of the

May?or's hon?esty, I have a horse I my?self helped to foal. And
what have I done to

de?serve these things that would have been mine in any case,
but for the loss of a

sin?gle pa?per? What have I done so that he should give ye
mon?ey? What have I

done save promise to fuck him while his wife of forty year sleeps
down the hall?"

"Is it the mon?ey ye want, then?" Aunt Cord asked, smil?ing fu?
ri?ous?ly. "Do ye and

do ye and aye? Ye shall have it, then. Take it, keep it, lose it,
feed it to the swine, I

care not!"

She turned to her purse, which hung on a post by the stove. She
be?gan to fum?ble in

it, but her mo?tions quick?ly lost speed and con?vic?tion. There
was an oval of mir?ror

mount?ed to the left of the kitchen door?way, and in it Su?sans
caught sight oth?er

about's face. What she saw there—a mix?ture of ha?tred, dis?
may, and greed—made

her heart sink.

"Nev?er mind, Aunt. I see thee's loath to give it up, and I
wouldn't have it, any?way.

It's whore's mon?ey."

Aunt Cord turned back to her, face shocked, her purse con?ve?
nient?ly for?got?ten. "

'Tis not whor?ing, ye stupid get! Why, some of the great?est

wom?en in his?to?ry have

been gillys, and some of the great?est men have been born of gillys. ‘Tis not whor?ing!“

Su?san ripped the red silk blouse from where it hung and held it up. The shirt

mould?ed it?self to her breasts as if it had been long?ing all the while to touch them.

”Then why does he send me these whore’s clothes?“

”Su?san!“ Tears stood in Aunt Cord’s eyes.

Su?san flung the shirt at her as she had the or?ange slices. It land?ed on her shoes.

”Pick it up and put it on yer?self, if ye fan?cy. You spread yer legs for him, if ye fan?cy.“

She turned and hurled her?self out the door. Her aunt’s half?hys?ter?ical shriek had

fol?lowed her: ”Don’t thee go off think?ing fool?ish thoughts, Susan! Fool?ish

thoughts lead to fool?ish deeds, and it’s too late for ei?ther! Thee’s agreed!“

She knew that. And how?ev?er fast she rode Py?lon along the Drop, she could not

out?race her know?ing. She had agreed, and no mat?ter how hor?ri fied Pat Del?ga?do

might have been at the fix she had got?ten her?self in?to, he would have seen one

thing clear—she had made a promise, and promis?es must be kept. Hell await?ed

those who would not do so.

3

She eased the rosil?lo back while he still had plen?ty of wind. She looked be?hind

her, saw that she had come near?ly a mile, and brought him down fur?ther—to a

can?ter, a trot, a fast walk. She took a deep breath and let it out. For the first time

that morn?ing she reg?is?tered the day’s bright beau?ty—gulls cir?cling in the hazy air

off to the west, high grass?es all around her, and flow?ers in ev?ery shad?ed cran?ny:

corn?flow?ers and lupin and phlox and her fa?vorites, the delicate blue silk?flow?ers.

From ev?ery where came the som?no?lent buzz of bees. The sound soothed her, and

with the high surge of her emotions subsiding a little, she was able to admit

something to herself... admit it, and then voice it aloud.

"Will Dearborn," she said, and shivered at the sound of his name on her lips, even

though there was no one to hear it but Pylon and the bees. So she said it again, and

when the words were out she abruptly turned her own wrist inward to her mouth

and kissed it where the blood beat close to the surface. The action shocked her

because she hadn't known she was going to do it, and shocked her more because

the taste of her own skin and sweat aroused her immensely. She felt an urge to

cool herself off as she had in her bed after meeting him. The way she felt, it would

be short work.

Instead, she growled her father's favorite cuss—"Oh, bite it!"—and spat past her

boot. Will Dearborn had been responsible for all too much upset in her life these

last three weeks; Will Dearborn with his unsettling blue eyes, his dark tumb of

hair, and his stiff-necked judgmental attitude. I can be discrete, madam. As for

propriety? I'm amazed you even know the word.

Every time she thought of that, her blood sang with anger and shame. Mostly

anger. How dare he presume to make judgments? He who had grown up

possessing every luxury, no doubt with servants to tend his every whim and so

much gold that he likely didn't even need it—he would be given the things he

wanted free, as a way of currying favor. What would a boy like that—for that was

all he was, really, just a boy—know about the hard choices she had made? For

that matter, how could such as Mr. Will Dearborn of Hemphill understand that she

hadn't really made those choices at all? That she had been carried to them the way

a mother cat carries a wayward kitten back to the nesting-box, by the scruff of the

neck?

Still, he wouldn't leave her mind; she knew, even if Aunt Cord didn't, that there

had been an un?seen third present at their quar?rel this morn?ing.

She knew some?thing else as well, some?thing that would have up?set her aunt to no end.

Will Dear?born hadn't for?got?ten her, ei?ther.

4

About a week af?ter the wel?com?ing din?ner and Dear?born's dis?as?trous, hurt?ful

re?mark to her, the re?tard?ed slops?-?fel?la from the Trav?ellers' Rest— Sheemie, folks

called him—had ap?peared at the house Su?san and her aunt shared. In his hands he

held a large bou?quet, most?ly made up of the wild-?flow?ers that grew out on the

Drop, but with a scat?ter?ing of dusky wild ros?es, as well. They looked like pink

punc?tu?ation marks. On the boy's face there had been a wide, sun?ny grin as he

swung the gate open, not wait?ing for an in?vi?ta?tion.

Su?san had been sweep?ing the front walk at the time; Aunt Cord had been out back,

in the gar?den. That was for?tu?nate, but not very sur?pris?ing;

these days the two of them got on best when they kept apart as much as they could.

Su?san had watched Sheemie come up the walk, his grin beam?ing out from be?hind

his up?held freight of flow?ers, with a mix?ture of fas?ci?na?tion and hor?ror.

"G'day, Su?san Del?ga?do, daugh?ter of Pat," Sheemie said cheer?ful?ly. "I come to you

on an er?rand and cry yer par?don at any trou?bleation I be, oh aye, for I am a

prob?lem for folks, and know it same as them. These be for you. Here."

He thrust them out, and she saw a small, fold?ed en?ve?lope tucked amongst them.

"Su?san?" Aunt Cord's voice, from around the side of the house . . . and get?ting

clos?er. "Su?san, did I hear the gate?"

"Yes, Aunt!" she called back. Curse the wom?an's sharp ears!

Su?san nim?bly

plucked the en?ve?lope from its place among the phlox and daisies. In?to her dress

pock?et it went.

“They from my third-?best friend,” Sheemie said. “I got three dif?fer?ent friends now.

This many.” He held up two fin?gers, frowned, added two more, and then grinned

splen?did?ly. “Arthur Heath my first-?best friend, Dick Stock?worth my sec?ond-?best

friend. My third-?best friend—”

“Hush!” Su?san said in a low, fierce voice that made Sheemie’s smile fade. “Not a

word about your three friends.”

A fun?ny lit?tle flush, al?most like a pock?et fever, raced across her skin—it seemed to

run down her neck from her cheeks, then slip all the way to her feet. There had

been a lot of talk in Ham?bry about Sheemie’s new friends dur?ing the past

week—talk about lit?tle else, it seemed. The sto?ries she had heard were out?landish,

but if they weren’t true, why did the ver?sions told by so many dif?fer?ent wit?ness?es

sound so much alike?

Su?san was still try?ing to get her?self back un?der con?trol when Aunt Cord swept

around the com?er. Sheemie fell back a step at the sight of her, puz?zle?ment

be?com?ing out?right dis?may. Her aunt was al?ler?gic to beestings, and was present?ly

swad?dled from the top of her straw ‘br?era to the hem of her fad?ed gar?den dress in

gauzy stuff that made her look pe?cu?liar in strong light and down?right eerie in

shade. Adding a fi?nal touch to her cos?tume, she car?ried a pair of dirt-?streaked

gar?den shears in one gloved hand.

She saw the bou?quet and bore down on it, shears raised. When she reached her

niece, she slid the scis?sors in?to a loop on her belt (al?most re luc?tant?ly, it seemed to

the niece her?self) and part?ed the veil on her face. “Who sent ye those?”

“I don’t know. Aunt,” Su?san said, much more calm?ly than she

felt. "This is the

young man from the inn—"

"Inn!" Aunt Cord snorted.

"He doesn't seem to know who sent him," Susan carried on. If only she could get

him out of here! "He's, well, I suppose you'd say he's—"

"He's a fool, yes, I know that." Aunt Cord cast Susan a brief, irritated look, then

bent her attention on Sheemie. Talking with her gloved hands upon her knees,

shouting directly into his face, she asked: "WHO . . . SENT . . . THESE . . .

FLOWERS . . . YOUNG... MAN? "

The wings of her face-veil, which had been pushed aside, now fell back into place.

Sheemie took another step backward. He looked frightened.

"WAS IT . . . PERHAPS . . . SOMEONE FROM... SEAFRONT? . . . FROM . . .

MAYOR . . . THORIN? . . . TELL ...ME... AND . . . I'LL . . . GIVE... YOU . . . A

PENNY. "

Susan's heart sank, sure he would tell—he'd not have the wit to understand he'd be

getting her into trouble. Will, too, like ly.

But Sheemie only shook his head. "Don't remember. I got a empty head, sai, so I do.

Stanley says I a bug wit."

His grin shone out again, a splendid thing full of white, even teeth. Aunt Cord

answered it with a grimace. "Oh, fool! Be gone, then. Straight back to town,

too—don't be hanging around hoping for a goose-feather. For a boy who can't

remember deserves not so much as a penny! And don't you come back here again,

no matter who wants you to carry flowers for the young sai. Do you hear me?"

Sheemie had nodded eagerly. Then: "Sai?"

Aunt Cord glowered at him. The vertical line on her forehead had been very

prominent that day.

"Why you all wropped up in cobwebbies, sai?"

"Get out of here, ye impudent cull!" Aunt Cord cried. She had a good loud voice

when she wanted to use it, and Sheemie jumped back from her

in alarm. When she

was sure he was headed back down the High Street toward town and had no

intention of returning to their gate and hanging about in hopes of a tip, Aunt Cord

had turned to Susan.

“Get those in some way before they wilt, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, and

don’t go mooning about, wondering who your secret admirer might be.”

Then Aunt Cord had smiled. A real smile. What hurt Susan the most, confused her

the most, was that her aunt was no candle-story ogre, no witch like Rhea of the

Coos. There was no monster here, only a maiden lady with some few social

pretensions, a love of gold and silver, and a tear of being turned out, penniless,

into the world.

“For folks such as us, Susie-pie,” she said, speaking with a terrible heavy

kindness, “ ’tis best to stick to our housework and leave dreams to them as can

afford them.”

5

She had been sure the flowers were from Will, and she was right. His note was

written in a hand which was clear and passing fair.

Dear Susan Delgado,

I spoke out of turn the other night, and cry your pardon. May I see you and

speak to you? It must be private. This is a matter of importance. If you will

see me, get a message to the boy who brings this. He is safe.

Will Dearborn

A matter of importance. Underlined. She felt a strong desire to know what was so

important to him, and cautioned herself against doing anything foolish. Perhaps he

was smitten with her ... and if so, whose fault was that? Who had talked to him,

riding his horse, showed him her legs in a flashy carnyval dismount? Who had put

her hands on his shoulders and kissed him?

Her cheeks and forehead burned at the thought of that, and an?

oth?er hot ring

seemed to go slip?ping down her body. She wasn't sure she re?gretted the kiss, but

it had been a mis?take, re?grets or no re?grets. See?ing him again now would be a worse one.

Yet she want?ed to see him, and knew in her deep?est heart that she was ready to set

her anger at him aside. But there was the promise she had made. The wretched promise.

That night she lay sleep?less, toss?ing about in her bed, first think?ing it would be

bet?ter, more dig?ni?fied, just to keep her si?lence, then com?pos?ing men?tal notes

any?way—some haughty, some cold, some with a lace-?edge of flir?ta?tion.

When she heard the mid?night bell ring, pass?ing the old day out and call?ing the new

one in, she de?cid?ed enough was enough. She'd thrown her?self from her bed, gone

to her door, opened it, and thrust her head out in?to the hall. When she heard Aunt

Cord's flute?like snores, she had closed her door again, crossed to her lit?tle desk by

the win?dow, and lit her lamp. She took one of her sheets of parch?ment pa?per from

the top draw?er, tore it in half (in Ham?bry, the on?ly crime greater than wast?ing

pa?per was wast?ing thread?ed stock?line), and then wrote quick?ly, sens?ing that the

slight?est hes?ita?tion might con?demn her to more hours of in?de?ci?sion. With no

salu tation and no sig?na?ture, her re?sponse took on?ly a breath to write:

I may not see you. 'Twould not be prop?er.

She had fold?ed it small, blew out her lamp, and re?turned to bed with the note

safe?ly tucked un?der her pil?low. She was asleep in two min?utes. The fol?low?ing day,

when the mar?ket?ing took her to town, she had gone by the Trav?ellers' Rest, which,

at eleven in the morn?ing, had all the charm of some?thing which has died bad?ly at

the side of the road.

The sa?loon's door-?yard was a beat?en dirt square bi?sect?ed

by a long hitch?ing rail

with a wa?ter?ing trough be?neath. Sheemie was trundling a wheel?bar?row along the

rail, pick?ing up last night's horse-?drop?pings with a shov?el. He was wear?ing a

com?ical pink som?brero, and singing "Gold?en Slip?pers." Su?san doubt?ed if many of

the Rest's pa?trons would wake up feel?ing as well as Sheemie ob?vi?ous?ly did this

morn?ing ... so who, when you came right down to it, was more soft-?head?ed?

She looked around to make sure no one was pay?ing heed to her, then went over to

Sheemie and tapped him on the shoul?der. He looked frightened at first, and Su?san

didn't blame him—ac?cord?ing to the sto?ries she'd been hear?ing, Jonas's friend

De?pape had al?most killed the poor kid for spilling a drink on his boots.

Then Sheemie rec?og?nized her. "Hel?lo, Su?san Del?ga?do from out there by the edge

of town," he said com?pan?ion?ably. "It's a good day I wish you, sai."

He bowed—an amus?ing im?ita?tion of the In?ner Ba?ronies bow fa?vored by his three

new friends. Smil?ing, she dropped him a bit of curt?sey (wear?ing jeans, she had to

pre?tend at the skirt-?hold?ing part, but wom?en in Mejis got used to curt?sey?ing in

pre?tend skirts).

"See my flow?ers, sai?" he asked, and point?ed to?ward the un?paint?ed side of the

Rest. What she saw touched her deeply: a line of mixed blue and white silk?flow?ers

grow?ing along the base of the build?ing. They looked both brave and pa?thet?ic,

flur?ry?ing there in the faint morn?ing breeze with the bald, turd-?lit?tered yard be?fore

them and the splin?tery pub?lic house be hind them.

"Rid you grow those, Sheemie?"

"Aye, so I did. And Mr. Arthur Heath of Gilead has promised me yel low ones."

"I've nev?er seen yel?low silk?flow?ers."

"Noey-?no, me nei?ther, but Mr. Arthur Heath says they have them in Gilead." He

looked at Su?san solemn?ly, the shov?el held in his hands as a sol?dier would hold a

gun or spear at port arms. "Mr. Arthur Heath saved my life. I'd do any?thing for him."

"Would you, Sheemie?" she asked, touched.

"Al?so, he has a look?out! It's a bird's head! And when he talks to it, tendy-?pre?tend, do I laugh? Aye, fit to split!"

She looked around again to make sure no one was watch?ing (save for the carved

totems across the street), then re?moved her note, fold?ed small, from her jeans pock?et.

"Would you give this to Mr. Dear?born for me? He's al?so your friend, is he not?"

"Will? Aye!" He took the note and put it care?ful?ly in?to his own pock?et.

"And tell no one."

"Shh?hhh!" he agreed, and put a fin?ger to his lips. His eyes had been amus?ing?ly

round be?neath the ridicu?lous pink la?dy's straw he wore. "Like when I brought you the flow?ers. Husha?boo!"

"That's right, husha?boo. Fare ye well, Sheemie."

"And you, Su?san Del?ga?do."

He went back to his cleanup op?er?ations. Su?san had stood watch?ing him for a

mo?ment, feel?ing un?easy and out of sorts with her?self. Now that the note was

suc?cess?ful?ly passed, she felt an urge to ask Sheemie to give it back, to scratch out

what she had writ?ten, and promise to meet him. If on?ly to see his steady blue eyes

again, look?ing in?to her face.

Then Jonas's oth?er friend, the one with the cloak, came saun?ter?ing out of the

mer?can?tile. She was sure he didn't see her—his head was down and he was rolling

a cigarette—but she had no in?ten?tion of press?ing her luck. Reynolds talked to

Jonas, and Jonas talked—all too much!—to Aunt Cord. If Aunt Cord heard she

had been pass?ing the time of day with the boy who had brought her the flow?ers,

there were apt to be questions. Ones she didn't want to answer.

6

All that's history now, Susan—water under the bridge. Best to get your thoughts out of the past.

She brought Pylon to a stop and looked down the length of the Drop at the horses

that moved and grazed there. Quite a surprising number of them this morning.

It wasn't working. Her mind kept turning back to Will Dearborn.

What bad luck meeting him had been! If not for that chance encounter on her way

back down from the Coos, she might well have made peace with her situation by

now—she was a practical girl, after all, and a promise was a promise. She

certainly never would have expected herself to get all goosy-gushy over losing her

maidhead, and the prospect of carrying and bearing a child actually excited her.

But Will Dearborn had changed things; had gotten into her head and now lodged

there, a tenant who defied eviction. His remark to her as they danced stayed with

her like a song you can't stop humming, even though you hate it. It had been cruel

and stupidly self-righteous, that remark ... but was there not also a grain of truth in

it? Rhea had been right about Hart Thorin, of that much Susan no longer had any

doubt. She supposed that witches were right about men's lusts even when they

were wrong about everything else. Not a happy thought, but likely a true one.

It was Will Be Damned to You Dearborn who had made it difficult for her to

accept what needed accepting, who had goaded her into arguments in which she

could hardly recognize her own shrill and desperate voice, who came to her in her

dreams—dreams where he put his arms around her waist and kissed her, kissed

her, kissed her.

She dismount?ed and walked down?hill a lit?tle way with the reins looped in her fist.

Py?lon fol?lowed will?ing?ly enough, and when she stopped to look off in?to the blue

haze to the south?west, he low?ered his head and be?gan to crop again.

She thought she need?ed to see Will Dear?born once more, if on?ly to give her in?nate

prac?ti?cal?ity a chance to re?assert it?self. She need?ed to see him at his right size,

in?stead of the one her mind had cre?at?ed for him in her warm thoughts and warmer

dreams. Once that was done, she could get on with her life and do what need?ed

do?ing. Per?haps that was why she had tak?en this path—the same one she'd rid?den

yes?ter?day, and the day be fore yes?ter?day, and the day be?fore that. He rode this part

of the Drop; that much she had heard in the low?er mar?ket.

She turned away from the Drop, sud?den?ly know?ing he would be there, as if her

thought had called him—or her ka.

She saw on?ly blue sky and low ridge?line hills that curved gen?tly like the line of a

wom?an's thigh and hip and waist as she lies on her side in bed. Su?san felt a bit?ter

dis?ap?point?ment fill her. She could al?most taste it in her mouth, like wet tea leaves.

She start?ed back to Py?lon, mean?ing to re?turn to the house and take care of the

apol?ogy she reck?oned she must make. The soon?er she did it, the soon?er it would be

done. She reached for her left stir?rup, which was twist?ed a lit?tle, and as she did, a

rid?er came over the hori?zon, break ing against the sky at the place which looked to

her like a wom?an's hip. He sat there, on?ly a sil?hou?ette on horse?back, but she knew

who it was at once.

Run! she told her?self in a sud?den pan?ic. Mount and gal?lop! Get out of here!

Quick?ly! Be?fore some?thing ter?ri?ble hap?pens . . . be?fore it re?al?ly is ka, come like a

wind to take you and all your plans over the sky and far away!

She didn't run. She stood with Py?lon's reins in one hand, and

mured to him

when the rosil?lo looked up and nick?ered a greet?ing to the big
bay-?col?ored geld?ing
com?ing down the hill.

Then Will was there, first above her and look?ing down, then dis
mount?ed in an

easy, liq?uid mo?tion she didn't think she could have matched,
for all her years of

horse?man?ship. This time there was no kicked-?out leg and
plant?ed heel, no hat

swept over a com?ical?ly solemn bow; this time the gaze he
gave her was steady and

se?ri?ous and dis?qui?et?ing?ly adult.

They looked at each oth?er in the Drop's big si?lence, Roland of
Gilead and Su?san of

Mejis, and in her heart she felt a wind be?gin to blow. She
feared it and wel?comed
it in equal mea?sure.

7

"Good?morn, Su?san," he said. "I'm glad to see you again."

She said noth?ing, wait?ing and watch?ing. Could he hear her
heart beat ing as

clear?ly as she could? Of course not; that was so much ro?man?
tic twad?dle. Yet it still

seemed to her that ev?ery?thing with?in a fifty-?yard ra?dius
should be able to hear that

thump?ing.

Will took a step for?ward. She took a step back, look?ing at him
mis trust?ful?ly. He

low?ered his head for a mo?ment, then looked up again, his lips
set.

"I cry your par?don," he said.

"Do you?" Her voice was cool.

"What I said that night was un?war?rant?ed."

At that she felt a spark of re?al anger. "I care not that it was un?
war rant?ed; I care

that it was un?fair. That it hurt me."

A tear over?brimmed her left eye and slipped down her cheek.
She wasn't all cried

out af?ter all, it seemed.

She thought what she said would per?haps shame him, but al?
though faint col?or

came in?to his cheeks, his eyes re?mained firm?ly on hers.

"I fell in love with you," he said. "That's why I said it. It hap?
pened even be?fore

you kissed me, I think."

She laughed at that . . . but the simplicity with which he had spoken made her

laughter sound false in her own ears. Tiny. "Mr. Dearborn —"

"Will. Please."

"Mr. Dearborn," she said, patiently as a teacher working with a dull student, "the

idea is ridiculous. On the basis of one single meeting? One single kiss? A sister's

kiss?" Now she was the one who was blushing, but she hurried on. "Such things

happen in stories, but in real life? I think not."

But his eyes never left hers, and in them she saw some of Roland's truth: the deep

romance of his nature, buried like a fabulous streak of alien metal in the granite of

his practicality. He accepted love as a fact rather than a flower, and it rendered her

genial contemptuous over both of them.

"I cry your pardon," he repeated. There was a kind of brute stubbornness in him.

It exasperated her, amused her, and appalled her, all at the same time. "I don't ask

you to return my love, that's not why I spoke. You told me your affairs were

complicated . . ." Now his eyes did leave hers, and he looked off toward the Drop.

He even laughed a little. "I called him a bit of a fool, didn't I? To your face. So

who's the fool, after all?"

She smiled; couldn't help it. "Yes! So said you'd heard he was fond of strong drink

and berry-girls."

Roland hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. If his friend Arthur Heath had

done that, she would have taken it as a deliberate, comic gesture. Not with Will.

She had an idea he wasn't much for comedy.

Silence between them again, this time not so uncomfortable. The two horses,

Rusher and Pylon, cropping contentedly, side by side. If we were horses, all this

would be much easier, she thought, and almost giggled.

"Mr. Dearborn, you understand that I have agreed to an ar-

range?ment?"

"Aye." He smiled when she raised her eye?brows in sur?prise.
"It's not mock?ery but

the di?alect. It just. . . seeps in."

"Who told ye of my busi?ness?"

"The May?or's sis?ter."

"Coral." She wrin?kled her nose and de?cid?ed she wasn't sur?prised. And she

sup?posed there were oth?ers who could have ex?plained her situa?tion even more

crude?ly. El?dred Jonas, for one. Rhea of the Coos, for an oth?er. Best to leave it. "So

if ye un?der?stand, and if ye don't ask me to re?turn your . . . what?ev?er it is ye think

ye feel . . . why are we talk?ing? Why do ye seek me out? I think it makes ye

pass?ing un?com?fort?able—"

"Yes," he said, and then, as if stat?ing a sim?ple fact: "It makes me un?com?fort?able,

all right. I can bare?ly look at you and keep my head."

"Then may?hap it'd be best not to look, not to speak, not to think!" Her voice was

both sharp and a lit?tle shaky. How could he have the courage to say such things, to

just state them straight out and starey?-eyed like that? "Why did ye send me the

bou?quet and that note? Are ye not aware of the trou?ble ye could've got?ten me in?to?

If y'knew my aunt. . . ! She's al?ready spo?ken to me about ye, and if she knew about

the note ... or saw us to geth?er out here ..."

She looked around, ver?ify?ing that they were still un?ob?served. They were, at least

as best she could tell. He reached out, touched her shoul?der. She looked at him,

and he pulled his fin?gers back as if he had put them on some?thing hot.

"I said what I did so you'd un?der?stand," he said. "That's all. I feel how I feel, and

you're not re?spon?si?ble for that."

But I am, she thought. I kissed you. I think I'm more than a lit?tle re?spon?si?ble for

how we both feel. Will.

"What I said while we were danc?ing I re?gret with all my heart. Won't you give me

your par?don?"

"Aye," she said, and if he had tak?en her in his arms at that mo?ment, she would

have let him, and damn the con?se?quences. But he on?ly took off his hat and made

her a charm?ing lit?tle bow, and the wind died.

"Thankee-?sai."

"Don't call me that. I hate it. My name is Su?san."

"Will you call me Will?" "

She nod?ded.

"Good. Su?san, I want to ask you some?thing—not as the fel?low who in?sult?ed you

and hurt you be?cause he was jeal?ous. This is some?thing else en?tire?ly. May I?"

"Aye, I sup?pose," she said war?ily.

"Are you for the Af?fil?ia?tion?"

She looked at him, flab?ber?gast?ed. It was the last ques?tion in the world she had

ex?pect?ed . . . but he was look?ing at her se?ri?ous?ly.

"I'd ex?pect?ed ye and yer friends to count cows and guns and spears and boats and

who knows what else," she said, "but I didn't think thee would al?so count

Af?fil?ia?tion sup?port?ers."

She saw his look of sur?prise, and a lit?tle smile at the com?ers of his mouth. This

time the smile made him look old?er than he could pos?si?bly be. Su?san thought back

across what she'd just said, re?al?ized what must have struck him, and gave a small,

em?bar?rassed laugh. "My aunt has a way of laps?ing in?to thee and thou. My fa?ther

did, too. It's from a sect of the Old Peo?ple who called them?selves Friends."

"I know. We have the Friend?ly Folk in my part of the world still."

"Do you?"

"Yes ... or aye, if you like the sound of that bet?ter; I'm com?ing to. And I like the

way the Friends talk. It has a love?ly sound."

"Not when my aunt us?es it," Su?san said, think?ing back to the ar?gu ment over the

shirt. "To an?swer your ques?tion, aye—I'm for the Af?fil?ia?tion, I sup?pose. Be?cause

my da was. If ye ask am I strong for the Af?fil?ia?tion, I sup?

pose not. We see and

hear lit?tle enough of them, these days. Most?ly ru?mors and sto?ries car?ried by

drifters and far?trav?el?ling drum?mers. Now that there's no rail?way ...“ She

shrugged.

”Most of the or?di?nary day?to?day folk I've spo?ken to seem to feel the same. And

yet your May?or Thorin—“

”He's not my May?or Thorin,“ she said, more sharply than she had in?tend?ed.

”And yet the Barony's May?or Thorin has giv?en us ev?ery help we've asked for, and

some we haven't. I have on?ly to snap my fin?gers, and Kim?ba Rimer stands be?fore

me.“

”Then don't snap them,“ she said, look?ing around in spite of her?self. She tried to

smile and show it was a joke, but didn't make much suc?cess of it.

”The towns?folk, the fish?er?folk, the farm?ers, the cow?boys . . . they all speak well of

the Af?fil?ia?tion, but dis?tant?ly. Yet the May?or, his Chan?cel?lor, and the mem?bers of

the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation, Lengyll and Gar?ber and that lot—“

”I know them,“ she said short?ly.

”They're ab?so?lute?ly en?thu?si?as?tic in their sup?port. Men?tion the Af?fil?ia?tion to

Sher?iff Av?ery and he all but dances. In ev?ery ranch par?lor we're of?fered a drink

from an Eld com?mem?ora?tive cup, it seems.“

”A drink of what?“ she asked, a tri?fle rogu?ish?ly. ”Beer? Ale? Graf?“

”Al?so wine, whiskey, and pet?ti?bone,“ he said, not re?spond?ing to her smile. ”It's

al?most as if they wish us to break our vow. Does that strike you as strange?“

”Aye, a lit?tle; or just as Ham?bry hos?pi?tal?ity. In these parts, when

some?one—es?pe?cial?ly a young man—says he's tak?en the pledge, folks tend to think

him coy, not se?ri?ous.“

”And this joy?ful sup?port of the Af?fil?ia?tion amongst the movers and the shak?ers?

How does that strike you?"

"Queer."

And it did. Pat Del'ga'do's work had brought him in al'most dai'ly con tact with these

landown'ers and horse'breed'ers, and so she, who had tagged af'ter her da any time

he would let her, had seen plen'ty of them. She thought them a cold bunch, by and

large. She couldn't imag'ine John Croy'don or Jake White way'ing an Arthur Eld

stein in a sen'ti'men'tal toast... es pe'cial'ly not in the mid'dle of the day, when there

was stock to be run and sold.

Will's eyes were full up'on her, as if he were read'ing these thoughts.

"But you prob'ably don't see as much of the big fel'las as you once did," he said.

"Be'fore your fa'ther passed, I mean."

"Per'haps not. . . but do bum'blers learn to speak back'ward?"

No cau'tious smile this time; this time he out'right grinned. It lit his whole face.

Gods, how hand'some he was! "I sup'pose not. No more than cats change their

spots, as we say. And May'or Thorin doesn't speak of such as us —me and my

friends—to you when you two are alone? Or is that ques'tion be'yond what I have a

right to ask? I sup'pose it is."

"I care not about that," she said, toss'ing her head pert'ly enough to make her long

braid swing. "I un'der'stand lit'tle of pro'pri'ety, as some have been good enough to

point out." But she didn't care as much for his down cast look and flush of

em'bar'ass'ment as she had ex'pected. She knew girls who liked to tease as well as

flirt and to tease hard, some of them- but it seemed she had no taste for it.

Cer'tain'ly she had no de'sire to set her claws in him, and when she went on, she

spoke gen'tly. "I'm not alone with him, in any case."

And oh how ye do lie, she thought mourn'ful'ly, re'mem'ber'ing how Thorin had

em'braced her in the hall on the night of the par'ty, grop'ing at her breasts like a

child try?ing to get his hand in?to a can?dy-?jar; telling her that he burned for her. Oh
ye great liar.

“In any case, Will, Hart’s opin?ion of you and yer friends can hard?ly con?ern ye,

can it? Ye have a job to do, that’s all. If he helps ye, why not just ac?cept and be grate?ful?”

“Be?cause some?thing’s wrong here,” he said, and the se?ri?ous, al?most somber qual?ity
of his voice fright?ened her a lit?tle.

“Wrong? With the May?or? With the Horse?men’s As?so?ci?ation? What are ye talk?ing
about?”

He looked at her steadi?ly, then seemed to de?cide some?thing. “I’m go ing to trust
you, Su?san.”

“I’m not sure I want thy trust any more than I want thy love,” she said.

He nod?ded. “And yet, to do the job I was sent to do, I have to trust some?one. Can
you un?der?stand that?”

She looked in?to his eyes, then nod?ded.

He stepped next to her, so close she fan?cied she could feel the warmth of his skin.

”Look down there. Tell me what you see.“

She looked, then shrugged. ”The Drop. Same as al?ways.“ She smiled a lit?tle. ”And

as beau?ti?ful. This has al?ways been my fa?vorite place in all the world.“

”Aye, it’s beau?ti?ful, all right. What else do you see?“

”Hors?es, of cours?es.“ She smiled to show this was a joke (an old one of her da’s, in

fact), but he didn’t smile back. Fair to look at, and coura geous, if the sto?ries they

were al?ready telling about town were true— quick in both thought and move?ment,

too. Re?al?ly not much sense of hu?mor, though. Well, there were worse fail?ings.

Grab?bing a girl’s bo?som when she wasn’t ex?pect?ing it might be one of them.

”Hors?es. Yes. But does it look like the right num?ber of them? You’ve been see?ing

hors?es on the Drop all your life, and sure?ly no one who’s not in the Horse?men’s

As?so?ci?ation is bet?ter qual?ified to say.“

”And ye don’t trust them?“

”They’ve giv?en us ev?ery?thing we’ve asked for, and they’re as friend?ly as dogs

un?der the din?ner-?ta?ble, but no—I don’t think I do.“

”Yet ye’d trust me.“

He looked at her steadi?ly with his beau?ti?ful and fright?en?ing eyes—a dark?er blue

than they would lat?er be, not yet fad?ed out by the suns of ten thou?sand drift?ing

days. ”I have to trust some?one,“ he re?peat?ed.

She looked down, al?most as though he had re?buked her. He reached out, put gen?tle

fin?gers be?neath her chin, and tipped her face up again. ”Does it seem the right

num?ber? Think care?ful?ly!“

But now that he’d brought it to her at?ten?tion, she hard?ly need?ed to think about it at

all. She had been aware of the change for some time, she sup?posed, but it had been

grad?ual, easy to over?look.

”No,“ she said at last. ”It’s not right.“

”Too few or too many? Which?“

She paused for a mo?ment. Drew in breath. Let it out in a long sigh. ”Too many.

Far too many.“

Will Dear?born raised his clenched fists to shoul?der-?height and gave them a sin?gle

hard shake. His blue eyes blazed like the spark-?lights of which her grand-?da had

told her. ”I knew it,“ he said. ”I knew it.“

8

”How many hors?es are down there?“ he asked.

”Be?low us? Or on the whole Drop?“

”Just be?low us.“

She looked care?ful?ly, mak?ing no at?tempt to ac?tu?al?ly count. That didn’t work; it

on?ly con?fused you. She saw four good-?sized groups of about twen?ty hors?es each,

mov?ing about on the green al?most ex?act?ly as birds moved about in the blue above

them. There were per?haps nine small?er groups, rang?ing from octets to quar?tets ...

sev?er?al pairs (they re?mind?ed her of lovers, but ev?ery?thing did to?day, it seemed) ...

a few gal?lop?ing lon?ers—young stal?ions, most?ly . . .

“A hun?dred and six?ty?” he asked in a low, al?most hes?itant voice.

She looked at him, sur?prised. “Aye. A hun?dred six?ty’s the num?ber I had in mind.

To a pin.”

“And how much of the Drop are we look?ing at? A quar?ter? A third?”

“Much less.” She tilt?ed him a small smile. “As I think thee knows. A sixth of the

to?tal open graze, per?haps.”

“If there are a hun?dred and six?ty hors?es free?graz?ing on each sixth, that comes to ..

.”

She wait?ed for him to come up with nine hun?dred and six?ty. When he did, she

nod?ded. He looked down a mo?ment longer, and grunt?ed with sur?prise when

Rush?er nosed him in the small of the back. Su?san put a curled hand to her mouth

to sti?fle a laugh. From the im?pa?tient way he pushed the horse’s muz?zle away, she

guessed he still saw lit?tle that was fun?ny.

“How many more are sta?bled or train?ing or work?ing, do you reck?on?” he asked.

“One for ev?ery three down there. At a guess.”

“So we’d be talk?ing twelve hun?dred head of hors?es. All thread?ed stock, no mu?ties.”

She looked at him with faint sur?prise. “Aye. There’s al?most no mu?tie stock here in

Mejis ... in any of the Out?er Ba?ronies, for that mat?ter.”

“You true?breed more than three out of ev?ery five?”

“We breed em all! Of course ev?ery now and then we get a freak that has to be put down, but—”

“Not one freak out of ev?ery five live?births? One out of five born with—” How had

Ren?frew put it? “With ex?tra legs or its guts on the out?side?”

Her shocked look was enough an?swer. “Who’s been telling ye such?”

“Ren?frew. He al?so told me that there was about five hun?dred and sev en?ty head of thread?ed stock here in Mejis.”

“That’s just . . .” She gave a be?wil?dered lit?tle laugh. “Just crazy! If my da was

here—”

“But he’s not,” Roland said, his tone as dry as a snap?ping twig.
“He’s dead.”

For a mo?ment she seemed not to reg?is?ter the change in that tone. Then, as if an

eclipse had be?gun to hap?pen some?where in?side her head, her en?tire as?pect

dark?ened. “My da had an ac?ci?dent. Do you un?der?stand that, Will Dear?born? An

ac?ci?dent. It was ter?ri?bly sad, but the sort of thing that hap?pens, some?times. A horse

rolled on him. Ocean Foam. Fran says Foam saw a snake in the grass.”

“Fran Lengyll?”

“Aye.” Her skin was pale, ex?cept for two wild ros?es—pink, like those in the

bou?quet he’d sent her by way of Sheemie—glow?ing high up on her cheek?bones.

“Fran rode many miles with my fa?ther. They weren’t great friends—they were of

dif?fer?ent class?es, for one thing—but they rode to geth?er. I’ve a cap put away

some?where that Fran’s first wife made for my chris?ten?ing. They rode the trail

to?geth?er. I can’t be?lieve Fran Lengyll would lie about how my da died, let alone

that he had ... any?thing to do with it.”

Yet she looked doubt?ful?ly down at the run?ning hors?es. So many. Too many. Her

da would have seen. And her da would have won?dered what she was won?der?ing

now: whose brands were on the ex?tras?

“It so hap?pens Fran Lengyll and my friend Stock?worth had a dis?cus sion about

hors?es,” Will said. His voice sound?ed al?most ca?su?al, but there was noth?ing ca?su?al

on his face. “Over glass?es of spring wa?ter, af?ter beer had been of?fered and re?fused.

They spoke of them much as I did with Ren?frew at May?or Thorin’s wel?com?ing

din?ner. When Richard asked sai Lengyll to es?ti?mate rid?ing hors?es, he said per?haps

four hun?dred.”

“In?sane.”

“It would seem so,” Will agreed.

"Do they not ken?nit the hors'es are out here where ye can see em?"

"They know we've bare?ly got?ten start?ed," he said, "and that we've be?gun with the

fish?er?folk. We'll be a month yet, I'm sure they think, be fore we start to con?cern

our?selves with the horse?flesh here?abouts. And in the mean?time, they have an

at?ti?tude about us of... how shall I put it? Well, nev?er mind how I'd put it. I'm not

very good with words, but my friend Arthur calls it 'ge?nial con?tempt.' They leave

the hors'es out in front of our eyes, I think, be?cause they don't be?lieve we'll know

what we're look?ing at. Or be?cause they think we won't be?lieve what we're see?ing.

I'm very glad I found you out here."

Just so I could give you a more ac?cu?rate horse-?count? Is that the on?ly rea?son?

"But ye will get around to count?ing the hors'es. Even?tu?al?ly. I mean, that must

sure?ly be one of the Af?fil?ia?tion's main needs."

He gave her an odd look, as if she had missed some?thing that should have been

ob?vi?ous. It made her feel self-?con?scious.

"What? What is it?"

"Per?haps they ex?pect the ex?tra hors'es to be gone by the time we get around to this

side of the Barony's busi?ness."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. But I don't like this. Su?san, you will keep this just be tween the two

of us, won't you?"

She nod?ded. She'd be in?sane to tell any?one she had been with Will Dear?born,

un?chap?er?oned ex?cept by Rush?er and Py?lon, out on the Drop.

"It may all turn out to be noth?ing, but if it doesn't, know?ing could be dan?ger?ous."

Which led back to her da again. Lengyll had told her and Aunt Cord that Pat had

been thrown, and that Ocean Foam had then rolled up?on him. Nei?ther of them had

had any rea?son to doubt the man's sto?ry. But Fran Lengyll had al?so told Will's

friend that there were on?ly four hun?dred head of rid?ing stock
in Mejis, and that
was a bald lie.
Will turned to his horse, and she was glad.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

Part of her wanted him to stay—to stand close to her while...

long shadows flying across the grassland—but they had been together out here

too long already. There was no reason to think anyone would come along and see

them, but instead of comforting her, that idea for some reason made her more

nervous than ever.

He straightened the stirrup hanging beside the scabbarded shaft of his lance

(Rusher whichever way back in his throat, as if to say About time we got going),

then turned to her again. She felt actually faint as his gaze fell upon her, and now

the idea of ka was almost too strong to deny. She tried to tell herself it was just the

dim—that feeling of having lived a thing before—but it wasn't the dim; it was a

sense of finding a road one had been searching for all along.

"There's something else I want to say. I don't like returning to where we started,

but I must."

"No," she said faintly. "That's closed, surely."

"I told you that I loved you, and that I was jealous," he said, and for the first time

his voice had come unanchored a little, wavering in his throat. She was alarmed to

see that there were tears standing in his eyes. "There was more. Something more."

"Will, I don't want to—" She turned blindly for her horse. He took her shoulder

and turned her back. It wasn't a harsh touch, but there was an expectancy to it

that was dreadful. She looked helplessly up into his face, saw that he was young

and far from home, and suddenly understood she could not stand against him for

long. She wanted him so badly that she ached with it. She would have given a year

of her life just to be able to put her palms on his cheeks and feel his skin.

"You miss your father, Susan?"

"Aye," she whis?pered. "With all my heart I do."

"I miss my moth?er the same way." He held her by both shoul?ders now. One eye over?brimmed; one tear drew a sil?ver line down his cheek.

"Is she dead?"

"No, but some?thing hap?pened. About her. To her. Shit! How can I talk about it when I don't even know how to think about it? In a way, she did die. For me."

"Will, that's ter?ri?ble."

He nod?ded. "The last time I saw her, she looked at me in a way that will haunt me

to my grave. Shame and love and hope, all of them bound up to?geth?er. Shame at

what I'd seen and knew about her, hope, maybe, that I'd un?der?stand and for?give . .

." He took a deep breath. "The night of the par?ty, to?ward the end of the meal,

Rimer said some?thing fun?ny. You all laughed—"

"If I did, it was on?ly be?cause it would have looked strange if I was the on?ly one

who didn't," Su?san said. "I don't like him. I think he's a schemer and a con?niv?er."

"You all laughed, and I hap?pened to look down to?ward the end of the ta?ble.

To?ward Olive Thorin. And for a mo?ment—on?ly a mo?ment—I thought she was my

moth?er. The ex?pres?sion was the same, you see. The same one I saw on the

morn?ing when I opened the wrong door at the wrong time and came up?on my

moth?er and her—"

"Stop it!" she cried, pulling back from his hands. In?side her, ev?ery thing was

sud?den?ly in mo?tion, all the moor?ing-?lines and buck?les and clamps she'd been us?ing

to hold her?self to?geth?er seem?ing to melt at once. "Stop it, just stop it, I can't lis?ten

to you talk about her!"

She groped out for Py?lon, but now the whole world was wet prisms. She be?gan to

sob. She felt his hands on her shoul?ders, turn?ing her again, and she did not re?sist

them.

"I'm so ashamed," she said. "I'm so ashamed and so fright?ened

and I'm sor?ry. I've

for?got?ten my fa?ther's face and . . . and ..."

And I'll nev?er be able to find it again, she want?ed to say, but she didn't have to say

any?thing. He stopped her mouth with his kiss?es. At first she just let her?self be

kissed . . . and then she was kiss?ing him back, kiss ing him al?most fu?ri?ous?ly. She

wiped the wet?ness from be?neath his eyes with soft lit?tle sweeps of her thumbs,

then slipped her palms up his cheeks as she had longed to do. The feel?ing was

exquisite; even the soft rasp of the stub?ble close to the skin was exquisite. She slid

her arms around his neck, her open mouth on his, hold?ing him and kiss?ing him as

hard as she could, kiss?ing him there be?tween the hors?es, who sim?ply looked at

each oth?er and then went back to crop?ping grass.

9

They were the best kiss?es of his whole life, and nev?er for?got?ten: the yield ing

pli?an?cy of her lips and the strong shape of her teeth un?der them, ur gent and not

shy in the least; the fra?grance of her breath, the sweet line of her body pressed

against his. He slipped a hand up to her left breast, squeezed it gen?tly, and felt her

heart speed?ing un?der it. His oth?er hand went to her hair and combed along the side

of it, silk at her tem?ple. He nev?er for?got its tex?ture.

Then she was stand?ing away from him, her face flam?ing with blush and pas?sion,

one hand go?ing to her lips, which he had kissed un?til they were swollen. A lit?tle

trick?le of blood ran from the com?er of the low?er one. Her eyes, wide on his. Her

bo?som ris?ing and falling as if she had just run a race. And be?tween them a cur?rent

that was like noth?ing he had ev?er felt in his life. It ran like a riv?er and shook like a

fever.

"No more," she said in a trem?bling voice. "No more, please. If you re?al?ly do love

me, don't let me dis?hon?or my?self. I've made a promise. Any?

thing might come

later, after that promise was fulfilled, I suppose . . . if you still wanted me . . .”

“I would wait forever,” he said calmly, “and do anything for you but stand away

and watch you go with another man.”

“Then if you love me, go away from me. Please, Will!”

“Another kiss.”

She stepped forward at once, raising her face trustingly up to his, and he

understood he could do whatever he wanted with her. She was, at least for the

moment, no longer her own mistress; she might consequently be his. He could do

to her what Marten had done to his own mother, if that was his fancy.

The thought broke his passion apart, turned it to coals that fell in a bright shower,

winking out one by one in a dark wilderness. His father’s acceptance

(I have known for two years)

was in many ways the worst part of what had happened to him this year; how

could he fall in love with this girl—any girl—in a world where such evils of the

heart seemed necessary, and might even be repeated?

Yet he did love her.

Instead of the passionate kiss he wanted, he placed his lips lightly on the corner of

her mouth where the little rill of blood flowed. He kissed, tasting salt like the taste

of his own tears. He closed his eyes and shivered when her hand stroked the hair at

the nape of his neck.

“I’d not hurt Olive Thorin for the world,” she whispered in his ear. “No more than

I’d hurt thee, Will. I didn’t understand, and now ’tis too late to be put right. But

thank you for not... not taking what you could. And I’ll remember you always.

How it was to be kissed by you. It’s the best thing that ever happened to me, I

think. Like heaven and earth all wrapped up together, ay.”

“I’ll remember, too.” He watched her swing up into the saddle, and remembered

how her bare legs had flashed in the dark on the night he had met her. And

sud?den?ly he couldn't let her go. He reached for?ward, touched her boot.

"Su?san—"

"No," she said. "Please."

He stood back. Some?how.

"This is our se?cret," she said. "Yes?"

"Aye."

She smiled at that ... but it was a sad smile. "Stay away from me from now on,

Will. Please. And I'll stay away from you."

He thought about it. "If we can."

"We must, Will. We must."

She rode away fast. Roland stood be?side Rush?er's stir?rup, watch?ing her go. And

when she was out of sight over the hori?zon, still he watched.

10

Sher?iff Av?ery, Deputy Dave, and Deputy George Rig?gins were sit?ting on the

porch in front of the Sher?iff's of?fice and jail when Mr. Stock?worth and Mr. Heath

(the lat?ter with that id?iot?ic bird's skull still mount?ed on the horn of his sad?dle) went

past at a steady walk. The bell o' noon had rung fif?teen min?utes be?fore, and Sher?iff

Av?ery reck?oned they were on their way to lunch, per?haps at The Mill?bank, or

per?haps at the Rest, which put on a fair noon meal. Pop?kins and such. Av?ery liked

some?thing a lit?tle more fill?ing; half a chick?en or a haunch of beef suit?ed him just

fine.

Mr. Heath gave them a wave and a grin. "Good day, gents! Long life! Gen?tle

breezes! Hap?py sies?tas!"

They waved and smiled back. When they were out of sight, Dave said: "They

spent all mornin down there on the piers, countin nets. Nets! Do you be?lieve it?"

"Yessir," Sher?iff Av?ery said, lift?ing one mas?sive cheek a bit out of his rock?er and

let?ting off a noisy pre-?lun?cheon fart. "Yessir, I do. Aye."

George said: "If not for them fac?ing off Jonas's boys the way they done, I'd think

they was a pack of fools.”

“Nor would they like?ly mind,” Av?ery said. He looked at Dave, who was twirling

his mon?ocle on the end of its rib?bon and look?ing off in the di?rec?tion the boys had

tak?en. There were folks in town who had be?gun call?ing the Af?fil?ia?tion brats Lit?tle

Cof?fin Hunters. Av?ery wasn’t sure what to make of that. He’d soothed it down

be?tween them and Thorin’s hard boys, and had got?ten both a com?men?da?tion and a

piece of gold from Rimer for his ef?forts, but still. . . what to make of them?

“The day they came in,” he said to Dave, “ye thought they were soft. How do ye

say now?”

”Now?” Dave twirled his mon?ocle a fi?nal time, then popped it in his eye and stared

at the Sher?iff through it. ”Now I think they might have been a lit?tle hard?er than I

thought, af?ter all.”

Yes in?deed, Av?ery thought. But hard don’t mean smart, thank the gods. Aye, thank

the gods for that.

”I’m hun?gry as a bull, so I am,” he said, get?ting up. He bent, put his hands on his

knees, and ripped off an?oth?er loud fart. Dave and George looked at each oth?er.

George fanned a hand in front of his face. Sher?iff Herkimer Av?ery, Barony

Sher?iff, straight?ened up, look?ing both re?lieved and an?tic?ipa?to?ry. ”More room out

than there is in,” he said. ”Come on, boys. Let’s go down?street and tuck in?to a

lit?tle.”

11

Not even sun?set could do much to im?prove the view from the porch of the Bar K

bunkhouse. The build?ing—ex?cept for the cook-?shack and the sta ble, the on?ly one

still stand?ing on what had been the home acre—was L-?shaped, and the porch was

built on the in?side of the short arm. Left for them on it had been just the right

num?ber of seats: two splin?tery rock?ers and a wood?en crate

to which an unsta?ble

board back had been nailed.

On this evening, Alain sat in one of the rock?ers and Cuth?bert sat on the box-?seat,

which he seemed to fan?cy. On the rail, peer?ing across the beat?en dirt of the

door?yard and to?ward the burned-?out hulk of the Gar?ber home place, was the look?out.

Alain was bone-?tired, and al?though both of them had bathed in the stream near the

west end of the home acre, he thought he still smelled fish and sea?weed on

him?self. They had spent the day count?ing nets. He was not averse to hard work,

even when it was monotonous, but he didn't like point?less work. Which this was.

Ham?bry came in two parts: the fish?ers and the horse-?breed?ers. There was noth?ing

for them among the fish?ers, and af?ter three weeks all three of them knew it. Their

an?swers were out on the Drop, at which they had so far done no more than look.

At Roland's or?der.

The wind gust?ed, and for a mo?ment they could hear the low, grum bling,

squeal?ing sound of the thin?ny.

"I hate that sound," Alain said.

Cuth?bert, un?usu?al?ly silent and in?tro?spec?tive tonight, nod?ded and said on?ly "Aye."

They were all say?ing that now, not to men?tion So you do and So I am and So it is.

Alain sus?pect?ed the three of them would have Ham bry on their tongues long af?ter

they had wiped its dust from their boots.

From be?hind them, in?side the bunkhouse door, came a less un?pleas?ant sound—the

coo?ing of pi?geons. And then, from around the side of the bunkhouse, a third, for

which he and Cuth?bert had un?con?scious?ly been lis?ten?ing as they sat watch?ing the

sun go down: horse's hoofs. Rush?er's.

Roland came around the com?er, rid?ing easy, and as he did, some?thing hap?pened

that struck Alain as odd?ly por?ten?tous ... a kind of omen.

There was a flur?ry-?flut?ter

of wings, a dark shape in the air, and sud?den?ly a bird was roost?ing on Roland's shoul?der.

He didn't jump; bare?ly looked around. He rode up to the hitch?ing rail and sat there,

hold?ing out his hand. "Hile," he said soft?ly, and the pi?geon stepped in?to his palm.

Bound to one of its legs was a cap?sule. Roland re moved it, opened it, and took

out a tiny strip of pa?per, which had been rolled tight. In his oth?er hand he held the pi?geon out.

"Hile," Alain said, hold?ing out his own hand. The pi?geon flew to it. As Roland

dis?mount?ed, Alain took the pi?geon in?to the bunkhouse, where the cages had been

placed be?neath an open win?dow. He un?gat?ed the cen ter one and held out his hand.

The pi?geon which had just ar?rived hopped in; the pi?geon in the cage hopped out

and in?to his palm. Alain shut the cage door, latched it, crossed the room, and

turned up the pil?low of Bert's bunk. Be?neath it was a linen en?ve?lope con?tain?ing a

num?ber of blank pa?per strips and a tiny stor?age-?pen. He took one of the strips and

the pen, which held its own small reser?voir of ink and did not have to be dipped.

He went back out on the porch. Roland and Cuth?bert were study?ing the un?rolled

strip of pa?per the pi?geon had de?liv?ered from Gilead. On it was a line of tiny

ge?omet?ric shapes:

"What does it say?" Alain asked. The code was sim?ple enough, but he could not

get it by heart or read it on sight, as Roland and Bert had been able to, al?most

im?me?di?ate?ly. Alain's tal?ents—his abil?ity to track, his easy ac?cess to the touch—lay

in oth?er di?rec?tions.

" 'Far?son moves east,' " Cuth?bert read. " 'Forces split, one big, one small. Do you

see any?thing un?usu?al.' " He looked at Roland, al?most of fend?ed. "Any?thing

un?usu?al, what does that mean?"

Roland shook his head. He didn't know. He doubt?ed if the men who had sent the

mes?sage—of whom his own fa?ther was al?most sure?ly one—did, ei?ther.

Alain hand?ed Cuth?bert the strip and the pen. With one fin?ger Bert stroked the head

of the soft?ly coo?ing pi?geon. It ruf?led its wings as if al ready anxious to be off to

the west.

"What shall I write?" Cuth?bert asked. "The same?"

Roland nod?ded.

"But we have seen things that are un?usu?al!" Alain said. "And we know things are

wrong here! The hors?es ... and at that small ranch way south ... I can't re?mem?ber

the name . . ."

Cuth?bert could. "The Rock?ing H."

"Aye, the Rock?ing H. There are ox?en there. Ox?en! My gods, I've nev?er seen them,

ex?cept for pic?tures in a book!"

Roland looked alarmed. "Does any?one know you saw?"

Alain shrugged im?pa?tient?ly. "I don't think so. There were drovers about—three,

maybe four—"

"Four, aye," Cuth?bert said qui?et?ly.

"—but they paid no at?ten?tion to us. Even when we see things, they think we

don't."

"And that's the way it must stay." Roland's eyes swept them, but there was a kind

of ab?sence in his face, as if his thoughts were far away. He turned to look to?ward

the sun?set, and Alain saw some?thing on the col lar of his shirt. He plucked it, a

move made so quick?ly and nim?bly that not even Roland felt it. Bert couldn't have

done that, Alain thought with some pride.

"Aye, but—"

"Same mes?sage," Roland said. He sat down on the top step and looked off to?ward

the evening red?ness in the west. "Pa?tience, Mr. Richard Stock-?worth and Mr.

Arthur Heath. We know cer?tain things and we be?lieve cer tain oth?er things. But

would John Far?son come all this way sim?ply to re?sup?ply hors?es? I don't think so.

I'm not sure, hors?es are valu?able, aye, so they are . . . but I'm not sure. So we wait."

"All right, all right, same mes?sage." Cuth?bert smoothed the scrap of pa?per flat on

the porch rail, then made a small se?ries of sym?bols on it. Alain could read this

mes?sage; he had seen the same se?quence sev?er?al times since they had come to

Ham?bry. "Mes?sage re?ceived. We are fine. Noth?ing to re?port at this time."

The mes?sage was put in the cap?sule and at?tached to the pi?geon's leg. Alain went

down the steps, stood be?side Rush?er (still wait?ing pa?tient?ly to be un?sad?dled), and

held the bird up to?ward the fad?ing sun?set. "Hile!"

It was up and gone in a flut?ter of wings. For a mo?ment on?ly they saw it, a dark

shape against the deep?en?ing sky.

Roland sat look?ing af?ter. The dreamy ex?pres?sion was still on his face. Alain found

him?self won?der?ing if Roland had made the right de?ci?sion this evening. He had

nev?er in his life had such a thought. Nor ex?pect?ed to have one.

"Roland?"

"Hm?mm?" Like a man half-?awak?ened from some deep sleep.

"I'll un?sad?dle him, if you want." He nod?ded at Rush?er. "And rub him down."

No an?swer for a long time. Alain was about to ask again when Roland said, "No.

I'll do it. In a minute or two." And went back to look?ing at the sun?set.

Alain climbed the porch steps and sat down in his rock?er. Bert had re?sued his

place on the box-?seat. They were be?hind Roland now, and Cuth?bert looked at

Alain with his eye?brows raised. He point?ed to Roland and then looked at Alain

again.

Alain passed over what he had plucked from Roland's col?lar. Al though it was

al?most too fine to be seen in this light, Cuth?bert's eyes were

gun?slinger's eyes, and

he took it eas?ily, with no fum?bling.

It was a long strand of hair, the col?or of spun gold. He could see from Bert's, face

that Bert knew whose head it had come from. Since ar?riv?ing in Ham?bry, they'd

met on?ly one girl with long blonde hair. The two boys' eyes met. In Bert's Alain

saw dis?may and laugh?ter in equal mea?sure.

Cuth?bert All?go?od raised his fore?fin?ger to his tem?ple and mimed pulling the trig?ger.

Alain nod?ded.

Sit?ting on the steps with his back to them, Roland looked to?ward the dy?ing sun?set

with dream?ing eyes.

CHAP?TER VI?II

BE?NEATH THE

PED?DLER'S MOON

1

The town of Ritzy, near?ly four hun?dred miles west of Mejis, was any?thing but.

Roy De?pape reached it three nights be?fore the Ped?dler's Moon— called Late-

sum?mer's Moon by some—came full, and left it a day lat?er.

Ritzy was, in fact, a mis?er?able lit?tle min?ing vil?lage on the east?ern slope of the Vi

Castis Moun?tains, about fifty miles from Vi Castis Cut. The town had but one

street; it was en?graved with iron-?hard wheel?ruts now, and would be?come a lake of

mud rough?ly three days af?ter the storms of au?tumn set in. There was the Bear and

Tur?tle Mer?can?tile & Sun?drie Items, where min?ers were for?bid?den by the Vi Castis

Com?pa?ny to shop, and a com?pa?ny store where no one but grub?bies would shop;

there was a com bined jail?house and Town Gath?er?ing Hall with a wind?mill-?cum-

gal?lows out front; there were six roar?ing bar?rooms, each more sor?did, des?per?ate,

and dan?ger?ous than the last.

Ritzy was like an ug?ly low?ered head be?tween a pair of huge shrugged

shoul?ders—the foothills. Above town to the south were the clapped-?out shacks

where the Com?pa?ny housed its min?ers; each puff of breeze brought the stench of

their un?limed com?mu?nal priv?ies. To the north were the mines them?selves:

dan?ger?ous, un?der?shored scratch drifts that went down fifty feet or so and then

spread like fin?gers clutch?ing for gold and sil?ver and cop?per and the oc?ca?sion?al nest

of fired?ims. From the out?side they were just holes punched in? to the bare and rocky

earth, holes like star?ing eyes, each with its own pile of till and scrap?ings be?side the

adit.

Once there had been free?hold mines up there, but they were all gone, reg?ulat?ed out

by the Vi Castis Com?pa?ny. De?pape knew all about it, because the Big Cof?fin

Hunters had been a part of that lit?tle spin and ra?ree. Just af?ter he'd hooked up with

Jonas and Reynolds, that had been. Why, they had got?ten those coffins tat?tooed on

their hands not fifty miles from here, in the town of Wind, a mud?pen even less

ritzy than Ritzy. How long ago? He couldn't right?ly say, al?though it seemed to him

that he should be able to. But when it came to reck?on?ing times past, De?pape of?ten

felt lost. It was hard even to re?mem?ber how old he was. Be?cause the world had

moved on, and time was dif?fer?ent, now. Soft?er.

One thing he had no trou?ble re?mem?ber?ing at all—his rec?ol?lec?tion was re?freshed by

the mis?er?able flare of pain he suf?fered each time he bumped his wound?ed fin?ger.

That one thing was a promise to him?self that he would see Dear?born, Stock?worth,

and Heath laid out dead in a row, hand to out stretched hand like a lit?tle girl's

pa?per dolls. He in?tend?ed to un?lim?ber the part of him which had longed so

boot?less?ly for Her Nibs these last three weeks and use it to hose down their dead

faces. The ma?jor?ity of his squirt would be saved for Arthur Heath of Gilead, New

Canaan. That laugh?ing chat?ter?box moth?er?fuck?er had a se?

ri?ous hos?ing-?down
com?ing.

De?pape rode out the sun?rise end of Ritzy's on?ly street, trot?
ted his horse up the

flank of the first hill, and paused at the top for a sin?gle look
back. Last night, when

he'd been talk?ing to the old bas?tard be?hind Hat?ti?gan's,
Ritzy had been roar?ing. This

morn?ing at sev?en, it looked as ghost?ly as the Ped?dler's
Moon, which still hung in

the sky above the rim of the plun?dered hills. He could hear the
mines tink-?tonk?ing

away, though. You bet. Those ba?bies tink-?tonked away sev?en
days a week. No rest

for the wicked . . . and he sup?posed that in?clud?ed him. He
dragged his horse's head

around with his usu?al un?think?ing and ham-?hand?ed force,
boot?ed its flanks, and

head?ed east, think?ing of the old bas?tard as he went. He had
treat?ed the old bas?tard

pass?ing fair, he reck?oned. A re?ward had been promised, and
had been paid for

in?for?ma?tion giv?en.

"Yar," De?pape said, his glass?es flash?ing in the new sun (it
was a rare morn?ing

when he had no hang?over, and he felt quite cheer?ful), "I reck?
on the old bug?ger

can't com?plain."

De?pape had had no trou?ble fol?low?ing the young culls' back?
trail; they had come

east on the Great Road the whole way from New Canaan, it ap
peared, and at

ev?ery town where they had stopped, they had been marked. In
most they were

marked if they did no more than pass through. And why not?
Young men on good

hors?es, no scars on their faces, no reg?ula?tor tat?toos on their
hands, good clothes on

their backs, ex?pen?sive hats on their heads. They were re?
mem?bered es?pe?cial?ly well

at the inns and sa?loons, where they had stopped to re?fresh
them?selves but had

drunk no hard liquor. No beer or graf, ei?ther, for that mat?ter.
Yes, they were

re?mem bered. Boys on the road, boys that seemed al?most to

shine. As if they had

come from an ear?li?er, bet?ter time.

Piss in their faces, De?pape thought as he rode. One by one. Mr. Arthur “Ha-?Ha ”

Heath last. I’ll save enough so it ‘d drown you, were you not al? ready at the end of

the path and in?to the clear?ing.

They had been no?ticed, all right, but that wasn’t good enough —if he went back to

Ham?bry with no more than that, Jonas would like?ly shoot his nose off. And he

would de?serve it. They may be rich boys, but that’s not all they are. De?pape had

said that him?self. The ques?tion was, what else were they? And fi?nal?ly, in the shit-

and-?sul?fur stench of Ritzy, he had found out. Not ev?ery? thing, per?haps, but enough

to al?low him to turn his horse around be?fore he found him? self all the way back in

fuck?ing New Canaan.

He had hit two oth?er sa?loons, sip?ping wa?tered beer in each, be?fore rolling in?to

Hat?ti?gan’s. He or?dered yet an?oth?er wa?tered beer, and pre? pared to en?gage the

bar?tender in con?ver?sa?tion. Be?fore he even be?gan to shake the tree, how?ev?er, the

ap?ple he want?ed fell off and dropped in?to his hand, neat as you please.

It was an old man’s voice (an old bas?tard’s voice), speak?ing with the shrill, head-

hurt?ing in?ten?si?ty which is the sole province of old bas?tards in their cups. He was

talk?ing about the old days, as old bas?tards al?ways did, and about how the world

had moved on, and how things had been ev?er so much bet?ter when he was a boy.

Then he had said some?thing which caused De?pape’s ears to prick up: some?thing

about how the old days might be com?ing again, for hadn’t he seen three young

lords not two months a-?gone, may?hap less, and even bought one of them a drink,

even if ’twas on?ly sas?par?il?ly so?da?

“You wouldn’t know a young lord from a young turd,” said a miss who ap?peared

to have all of four teeth left in her charm?ing young head.

There was gen?er?al laugh?ter at this. The old bas?tard looked around, of fend?ed. “I

know, all right,” he said. “I’ve for?got more than you’ll ev?er learn, so I have. One of

them at least came from the Eld line, for I saw his fa?ther in his face . . . just as

clear as I see your sag?gy tits, Jo?lene.” And then the old bas?tard had done

some?thing De?pape rather ad?mired—yanked out the front of the sa?loon-?whore’s

blouse and poured the re?main?der of his beer down it. Even the roars of laugh?ter

and heavy ap?plause which greet?ed this couldn’t en?tire?ly drown the girl’s caw of

rage, or the old man’s cries when she be?gan to slap and punch him about the head

and shoul?ders. These lat?ter cries were on?ly in?dig?nant at first, but when the girl

grabbed the old bas?tard’s own beer-?stein and shat?tered it against the side of his

head, they be?came screams of pain. Blood—mixed with a few wa tery dregs of

beer—be?gan to run down the old bas?tard’s face.

“Get out of here!” she yelled, and gave him a shove to?ward the door. Sev?er?al

healthy kicks from the min?ers in at?ten?dance (who had changed sides as eas?ily as

the wind changes di?rec?tions) helped him along. “And don’t come back! I can smell

the weed on your breath, you old cock-?suck?er! Get out and take your gods-?cussed

sto?ries of old days and young lords with you!”

The old bas?tard was in such man?ner con?veyed across the room, past the tootling

trum?pet-?play?er who served as en?ter?tain?ment for the pa?trons of Hat?ti?gan’s (that

young bowler-?hat?ted wor?thy added his own kick in the seat of the old bas?tard’s

dusty trousers with?out ev?er miss?ing so much as a sin?gle note of “Play, Ladies,

Play”), and out through the batwing doors, where he col?lapsed face-?first in?to the

street.

De?pape had saun?tered af?ter him and helped him up. As he

did so, he smelled an

acrid odor—not beer—on the old man’s breath, and saw the tell?
tale green?ish-?gray

dis?col?orations at the com?ers of his lips. Weed, all right. The
old bas?tard was

prob?ably just get?ting start?ed on it (and for the usu?al rea?
son: dev?il-?grass was free in

the hills, un?like the beer and whiskey that was sold in town),
but once they start?ed,

the fin?ish came quick.

“They got no re?spect,” the old bas?tard said thick?ly. “Nor un?
der?stand ing, ei?ther.”

“Aye, so they don’t,” said De?pape, who had not yet got?ten the
ac?cents of the

sea?coast and the Drop out of his speech.

The old bas?tard stood sway?ing, look?ing up at him, wip?ing
in?ef?fec?tu al?ly at the

blood which ran down his wrin?kled cheeks from his lac?er?at?
ed scalp. “Son, do you

have the price of a drink? Re?mem?ber the face of your fa?ther
and give an old soul

the price of a drink!”

“I’m not much for char?ity, old-?timer,” De?pape said, “but
may?hap you could earn

your?self the price of a drink. Step on over here, in?to my of?
fice, and let’s us see.”

He’d led the old bas?tard out of the street and back to the
board?walk, an?gling well

to the left of the black batwings with their gold?en shafts of
light spilling out above

and be?low. He wait?ed for a trio of min?ers to go by, singing at
the top of their lungs

(“Wom?an I love... is long and tall... she moves her body... like
a can?non?ball... ”),

and then, still hold?ing the old bas?tard by the el?bow, hail
guid?ed him in?to the al?ley

be?tween Hat?ti gan’s and the un?der?tak?ing es?tab?lish?ment
next door. For some

peo?ple, De pape mused, a vis?it to Ritzy could damn near
amount to one-?stop

shop?ping: get your drink, get your bul?let, get laid out next
door.

“Yer of?fice,” the old bas?tard cack?led as De?pape led him
down the al ley to?ward

the board fence and the heaps of rub?bish at the far end. The

wind blew, sting?ing

De?pape's nose with odors of sul?fur and car?bol?ic from the mines. From their right,

the sounds of drunk?en rev?el?ry pound?ed through the side of Hat?ti?gan's. "Your

of?fice, that's good."

"Aye, my of?fice."

The old man gazed at him in the light of the moon, which rode the slot of sky

above the al?ley. "Are you from Mejis? Or Tepachi?"

"Maybe one, maybe t'oth?er, maybe nei?ther."

"Do I know you?" The old bas?tard was look?ing at him even more close?ly, stand?ing

on tip?toe as if hop?ing for a kiss. Ugh.

De?pape pushed him away. "Not so close, dad." Yet he felt marginal?ly en?cour?aged.

He and Jonas and Reynolds had been here be?fore, and if the old man re?mem?bered

his face, like?ly he wasn't talk?ing through his hat about fel?lows he'd seen much

more re?cent?ly.

"Tell me about the three young lords, old dad." De?pape rapped on the wall of

Hat?ti?gan's. "Them in there may not be in?ter?est?ed, but I am."

The old bas?tard looked at him with a bleary, cal?cu?lat?ing eye. "Might there be a bit

o' met?al in it for me?"

"Yar," De?pape said. "If you tell me what I want to hear, I'll give you met?al."

"Gold?"

"Tell me, and we'll see."

"No, sir. Dick?er first, tell sec?ond."

De?pape seized him by the arm, whirled him around, and yanked a wrist which felt

like a bun?dle of sticks up to the old bas?tard's scrawny shoul?derblades. "Fuck with

me, dad, and we'll start by break?ing your arm."

"Let go!" the old bas?tard screamed breath?less?ly. "Let go, I'll trust to your

gen?eros?ity, young sir, for you have a gen?er?ous face! Yes! Yes in?deed!"

De?pape let him go. The old bas?tard eyed him war?ily, rub?bing his shoul?der. In the

moon?light the blood dry?ing on his cheeks looked black.

"Three of them, there were," he said. "Fine-?born lads."

"Lads or lords? Which is it, dad?"

The old bas?tard had tak?en the ques?tion thought?ful?ly. The whack on the head, the

night air, and hav?ing his arm twist?ed seemed to have sobered him up, at least

tem?porar?ily.

"Both, I do be?lieve," he said at last. "One was a lord for sure, whether them in

there be?lieve it or not. For I saw his fa?ther, and his fa?ther bore the guns. Not such

poor things such as you wear—beg?gin your par?don, I know they're the best to be

had these days—but re?al guns, such as were seen when my own dad was a boy.

The big ones with the san?dal?wood grips."

De?pape had stared at the old man, feel?ing a rise of ex?cite?ment . . . and a species of

re?luc?tant awe, as well. They act?ed like gun?slingers, Jonas had said. When

Reynolds protest?ed they were too young, Jonas had said they might be

ap?pren?tices, and now it seemed the boss had like?ly been right.

"San?dal?wood grips?" he had asked. "San?dal?wood grips, old dad?"

"Yep." The old man saw his ex?cite?ment, and his be?lief. He ex?pand?ed vis?ibly.

"A gun?slinger, you mean. This one young fel?low's fa?ther car?ried the big irons."

"Yep, a gun?slinger. One of the last lords. Their line is pass?ing, now, but my dad

knew him well enough. Steven De?schain, of Gilead. Steven, son of Hen?ry."

"And this one you saw not long ago—"

"His son. Hen?ry the Tail's grand?son. The oth?ers looked well-?born, as if they might

al?so come from the line of lords, but the one I saw come down all the way from

Arthur Eld, by one line or an?oth?er. Sure as you walk on two legs. Have I earned

my met?al yet?"

De?pape thought to say yes, then re?al?ized he didn't know which of the three culls

this old bas?tard was talk?ing about.

"Three young men," he mused. "Three high-borns. And did they have guns?"

"Not out where the drift-diggers of this town could see em," the old bastard said,

and laughed nastily. "But they had em, all right. Probably hid in their bedrolls. I'd

set my watch and war-rant on it."

"Aye," De-pape said. "I suppose you would. Three young men, one the son of a

lord. Of a gun-slinger, you think. Steven of Gilead." And the name was familiar to

him, aye, it was.

"Steven De-schain of Gilead, that's it."

"And what name did he give, this young lord?"

The old bastard had screwed his face up alarmingly in an effort to remember.

"Deerfield? Deerstine? I don't quite remember—"

"That's all right, I know it. And you've earned your metal."

"Have I?" the old bastard had edged close again, his breath gagging-sweet with the

weed. "Gold or silver? Which is it, my friend?"

"Lead," De-pape replied, then hauled leather and shot the old man twice in the

chest. Doing him a favor, really.

Now he rode back toward Mejis—it would be a faster trip without having to stop

in every dipshit little town and ask questions.

There was a flurry of wings close above his head. A pigeon—dark gray, it was,

with a white ring around its neck—fluttered down on a rock just ahead of him, as

if to rest. An interesting-looking bird. Not, De-pape thought, a wild pigeon.

Someone's escaped pet? He couldn't imagine anyone in this desolate quarter of the

world keeping anything but a half-wild dog to bite the squash off any would-be

robber (although what these folks might have worth robbing was another question

he couldn't answer), but he supposed anything was possible. In any case, roast

pigeon would go down a treat when he stopped for the night.

De-pape drew his gun, but before he could cock the hammer, the pigeon was off

and flying east. De-pape took a shot after it, anyway. Some

times you got lucky,

but ap?par?ent?ly not this time; the pi?geon dipped a lit?tle, then straight?ened out and

dis?ap?peared in the di?rec?tion De?pape him self was go?ing. He sat astride his horse

for a mo?ment, not much put out of coun?te?nance; he thought Jonas was go?ing to be

very pleased with what he had found out.

Af?ter a bit, he boot?ed his horse in the sides and be?gan to can?ter east along the

Barony Sea Road, back to?ward Mejis, where the boys who had em?bar?rassed him

were wait?ing to be dealt with. Lords they might be, sons of gun?slingers they might

be, but in these lat?ter days, even such as those could die. As the old bas?tard

him?self would un?doubt?ed?ly have point?ed out, the world had moved on.

2

On a late af?ter?noon three days af?ter Roy De?pape left Ritzy and head?ed his horse

to?ward Ham?bry again, Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain rode north and west of town,

first down the long swell of the Drop, then in?to the free?land Ham?bry folk called

the Bad Grass, then in?to de?ser?ty waste lands. Ahead of them and clear?ly vis?ible

once they were back in the open were crum bled and erod?ed bluffs. In the cen?ter

of these was a dark, al?most vagi?nal cleft; its edges so splin?tered it looked as if it

had been whacked in?to re?al?ity by an ill-?tem?pered god wield?ing a hatch?et.

The dis?tance be?tween the end of the Drop and the bluffs was per?haps six miles.

Three quar?ters of the way across, they passed the flat?lands' on?ly re?al ge?ograph?ic

fea?ture: a jut?ting up?thrust of rock that looked like a fin?ger bent at the first knuck?le.

Be?low it was a small, boomerang-?shaped green sward, and when Cuth?bert gave a

ul?ulat?ing yell to hear his voice bounce back at him from the bluffs ahead, a pack of

chat?ter?ing bil?ly-?bum?blers broke from this green?place and went rac?ing back

south?east, to?ward the Drop.

“That’s Hang?ing Rock,” Roland said. “There’s a spring at the base of it—on?ly one in these parts, they say.”

It was all the talk that passed be?tween them on the ride out, but a look of

un?mis?tak?able re?lief passed be?tween Cuth?bert and Alain be?hind Roland’s back. For

the last three weeks they had pret?ty much marched in place as sum?mer rolled

around them and past them. It was all well for Roland to say they must wait, they

must pay great?est at?ten?tion to the things that didn’t mat?ter and count the things

which did from the com?ers of their eyes, but nei?ther of them quite trust?ed the

dreamy, dis?con?nect?ed air which Roland wore these days like his own spe?cial

ver?sion of Clay Reynolds’s cloak. They didn’t talk about this be?tween them?selves;

they didn’t have to. Both knew that if Roland be?gan court?ing the pret?ty girl whom

May?or Thorin meant for his gilly (and who else could that long blonde hair have

be?longed to?), they would be in very bad trou?ble. But Roland showed no court?ing

plumage, nei?ther of them spied any more blonde hairs on his shirt-?col?lars, and

tonight he seemed more him?self, as if he had put that cloak of ab?strac?tion aside.

Tem?porar?ily, may?hap. Per?ma?nent?ly, if they were lucky. They could on?ly wait and

see. In the end, ka would tell, as it al?ways did.

A mile or so from the bluffs, the strong sea breeze which had been at their backs

for the whole ride sud?den?ly dropped, and they heard the low, aton?al squalling from

the cleft that was Eye?bolt Canyon. Alain pulled up, gri?mac?ing like a man who has

bit?ten in?to a fruit of ex?trav?agant sour?ness. All he could think of was a hand?ful of

sharp peb?bles, squeezed and ground to?geth?er in a strong hand. Buz?zards cir?cled

above the canyon as if drawn to the sound.

“The look?out don’t like it. Will.” Cuth?bert said, knock?ing his

knuck les on the

skull. "I don't like it much, ei?ther. What are we out here for?"

"To count," Roland said. "We were sent to count ev?ery?thing and see ev?ery?thing,

and this is some?thing to count and see."

"Oh, aye," Cuth?bert said. He held his horse in with some ef?fort; the low, grind?ing

wail of the thin?ny had made it skit?tish. "Six?teen hun?dred and four?teen fish?ing nets,

sev?en hun?dred and ten boats small, two hun?dred and four?teen boats large, sev?en?ty

ox?en that no?body will ad?mit to, and, on the north of town, one thin?ny. What?ev?er

the hell that is."

"We're go?ing to find out," Roland said.

They rode in?to the sound, and al?though none of them liked it, no one sug?gest?ed

they go back. They had come all the way out here, and Roland was right—this was

their job. Be?sides, they were cu?ri?ous.

The mouth of the canyon had been pret?ty well stopped up with brush, as Su?san

had told Roland it would be. Come fall, most of it would pro?ba bly be dead, but

now the stacked branch?es still bore leaves and made it hard to see in?to the canyon.

A path led through the cen?ter of the brush?-pile, but it was nar?row for the hors?es

(who might have balked at go?ing through, any?way), and in the fail?ing light Roland

could make out hard?ly any?thing.

"Are we go?ing in?" Cuth?bert asked. "Let the Record?ing An?gel note that I'm

against, al?though I'll of?fer no mutiny."

Roland had no in?ten?tion of tak?ing them through the brush and to?ward the source of

that sound. Not when he had on?ly the vaguest idea of what a thin?ny was. He had

asked a few ques?tions about it over the last few weeks, and got?ten lit?tle use?ful

re?sponse. "I'd stay away," was the ex?tent of Sher?iff Av?ery's ad?vice. So far his best

in?for?ma?tion was still what he had got?ten from Su?san on the night he met her.

"Sit easy, Bert. We're not go?ing in."

"Good," Alain said softly, and Roland smiled.

There was a path up the canyon's west side, steep and narrow, but passable if they

were careful. They went single file, stopping once to clear a rockfall, pitching

splintered chunks of shale and hornfels into the groaning trench to their right.

When this was done and just as the three of them were preparing to mount up

again, a large bird of some sort—perhaps a grouse, perhaps a prairie

chicken—rose above the lip of the canyon in an explosive whirl of feathers. Roland

dipped for his guns, and saw both Cuthbert and Alain doing the same. Quite

funny, considering that their firearms were wrapped in protective oilcloth and

secreted beneath the floorboards of the Bar K bunkhouse.

They looked at each other, said nothing (except with their eyes, which said

plenty), and went on. Roland found that the effect of being this close to the thinny

was curious—it wasn't a sound you could get used to. Quite the contrary, in

fact: the longer you were in the immediate vicinity of Eye-bolt Canyon, the more

that sound scraped away at your brain. It got into your teeth as well as your ears; it

vibrated in the knot of nerves below the breastbone and seemed to eat at the damp

and delicate tissue behind the eyes. Most of all, though, it got into your head,

telling you that everything you had ever been afraid of was just behind the next

curve of the trail or yonder pile of tumbled rock, waiting to snake out of its place

and get you.

Once they got to the flat and barren ground at the top of the path and the sky

opened out above them again it was a little better, but by then the light was almost

gone, and when they dismounted and walked to the canyon's crumbling edge, they

could see little but shadows.

"No good," Cuthbert said disgustedly. "We should have left

ear?li?er, Roland . . .

Will, I mean. What dum?mies we are!”

“I can be Roland to you out here, if you like. And we’ll see what we came to see

and count what we came to count—one thin?ny, just as you said. On?ly wait.”

They wait?ed, and not twen?ty min?utes lat?er the Ped?dler’s Moon rose above the

hori?zon—a per?fect sum?mer moon, huge and or?ange. It loomed in the dark?en?ing

vi?olet swim of the sky like a crash?ing plan?et. On its face, as clear as any?one had

ev?er seen it, was the Ped?dler, he who came out of Nones with his sack?ful of

squeal?ing souls. A hunched fig?ure made of smudged shad?ows with a pack clear?ly

vis?ible over one cring?ing shoul?der. Be?hind it, the or?ange light seemed to flame like

hell?fire.

“Ugh,” Cuth?bert said. “That’s an ill sight to see with that sound com ing up from

be?low.”

Yet they held their ground (and their hors?es, which pe?ri?od?ical?ly yanked back on

their reins as if to tell them they should al?ready be gone from this place), and the

moon rose in the sky, shrink?ing a lit?tle as it went and turn?ing sil?ver. Even?tu?al?ly it

rose enough to cast its bony light in?to Eye?bolt Canyon. The three boys stood

look?ing down. None of them spoke. Roland didn’t know about his friends, but he

didn’t think he him self could have spo?ken even if called on to do so.

A box canyon, very short and steep?sid?ed, Su?san had said, and the de scrip?tion was

per?fect?ly ac?cu?rate. She’d al?so said Eye?bolt looked like a chim?ney ly?ing on its side,

and Roland sup?posed that was al?so true, if you al?lowed that a falling chim?ney

might break up a lit?tle on im?pact, and lie with one crooked place in its mid?dle.

Up to that crook, the canyon floor looked or?di?nary enough; even the lit?ter of bones

the moon showed them was not ex?traor?di?nary. Many ani

imals which wan?dered

in?to box canyons hadn't the wit to find their way hack out again, and with Eye?bolt

the pos?si?bil?ity of es?cape was fur?ther re duced by the choke of brush piled at the

canyon's mouth. The sides were much too steep to climb ex?cept maybe for one

place, just be?fore that crooked lit?tle jog. There Roland saw a kind of groove

run?ning up the canyon wall, with enough jut?ting spurs in?side it

to—maybe!—pro?vide hand?holds. There was no re?al rea?son for him to note this; he

just did, as he would go on not?ing po?ten?tial es?cape-?routes his en?tire life.

Be?yond the jag in the canyon floor was some?thing none of them had ev?er seen

be?fore ... and when they got back to the bunkhouse sev?er?al hours lat?er, they all

agreed that they weren't sure ex?act?ly what they had seen. The lat?ter part of Eye?bolt

Canyon was ob?scured by a sullen, sil?very liques?cence from which snakes of

smoke or mist were ris?ing in stream?ers. The liq?uid seemed to move slug?gish?ly,

lap?ping at the walls which held it in. Lat?er, they would dis?cov?er that both liq?uid

and mist were a light green; it was on?ly the moon?light that had made them look

sil?ver.

As they watched, a dark fly?ing shape—per?haps it was the same one that had

fright?ened them be?fore—skimmed down to?ward the sur?face of the thin?ny. It

snatched some?thing out of the air—a bug? an?oth?er, small?er, bird?—and then

be?gan to rise again. Be?fore it could, a sil?very arm of liq uid rose from the canyon's

floor. For a mo?ment that soupy, grind?ing grum?ble rose a notch, and be?came al?most

a voice. It snatched the bird out of the air and dragged it down. Green?ish light,

brief and un?fo?cused, flashed across the sur?face of the thin?ny like elec?tric?ity, and

was gone.

The three boys stared at each other with frightened eyes.

Jump in, gun-slinger, a voice suddenly called. It was the voice of the thinny; it was

the voice of his father; it was also the voice of Marten the chanter, Marten the

seducer. Most terrible of all, it was his own voice.

Jump in and let all these cares cease. There is no love of girls to worry you here,

and no mourning of lost mothers to weigh your child's heart. Only the hum of the

growing cavity at the center of the universe; only the punky sweetness of rotting

flesh.

Come, gun-slinger. Be apart of the thinny.

Dreamy-faced and blank-eyed, Alain began walking along the edge of the drop,

his right boot so close to it that the heel puffed little clouds of dust over the chasm

and sent clusters of pebbles down into it. Before he could get more than five steps,

Roland grabbed him by the belt and yanked him roughly back.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Alain looked at him with sleepwalker's eyes. They began to clear, but slowly. "I

don't . . . know, Roland."

Below them, the thinny hummed and growled and sang. There was a sound, as

well: an oozing, sludgy mutter.

"I know," Cuthbert said. "I know where we're all going. Back to the Bar K. Come

on, let's get out of here." He looked pleadingly at Roland. "Please. It's awful."

"All right."

But before he led them back to the path, he stepped to the edge and looked down

at the smoky silver ooze below him. "Counting," he said with a kind of clear

defiance. "Counting one thinny." Then, lowering his voice: "And be damned to

you."

3

Their composition returned as they rode back—the sea-breeze in their faces was

wonderfully restorative after the dead and somehow baked smell of the canyon

and the thin?ny.

As they rode up the Drop (on a long di?ag?onal, so as to save the hors?es a lit?tle),

Alain said: "What do we do next, Roland? Do you know?"

"No. As a mat?ter of fact, I don't."

"Sup?per would be a start," Cuth?bert said bright?ly, and tapped the look?out's hol?low

skull for em?pha?sis.

"You know what I mean."

"Yes," Cuth?bert agreed. "And I'll tell you some?thing, Roland
—"

"Will, please. Now that we're back on the Drop, let me be Will."

"Aye, fine. I'll tell you some?thing, Will: we can't go on count?ing nets and boats

and looms and wheel?-irons much longer. We're run?ning out of things that don't

mat?ter. I be?lieve that look?ing stupid will be?come a good deal hard?er once we move

to the horse?-breed?ing side of life as it's lived in Ham?bry."

"Aye," Roland said. He stopped Rush?er and looked back the way they had come.

He was mo?men?tar?ily en?chant?ed by the sight of hors?es, ap?par ent?ly in?fect?ed with a

kind of moon?-mad?ness, frolic?ing and rac?ing across the sil?very grass. "But I tell

you both again, this is not just about hors?es. Does Far?son need them? Aye,

may?hap. So does the Af?fil?ia?tion. Ox?en as well. But there are hors?es

ev?ery?where—per?haps not as good as these, I'll ad?mit, but any port does in a storm,

so they say. So, if it's not hors?es, what is it? Un?til we know, or de?cide we'll nev?er

know, we go on as we are."

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

Part of the answer was waiting for them back at the Bar...

hitching rail and flicking its tail saucily. When the pigeon hopped into Roland's

hand, he saw that one of its wings was oddly frayed. Some animal—like a

cat—had crept up on it close enough to pounce, he reckoned.

The note curled against the pigeon's leg was short, but it explained a good deal of

what they hadn't understood.

I'll have to see her again, Roland thought after reading it, and felt a surge of

gladness. His pulse quickened, and in the cold silver light of the Peddler's Moon,

he smiled.

CHAPTER IX

citgo

1

The Peddler's Moon began to wane; it would take the hottest, fairest part of the

summer with it when it went. On an afternoon four days past the full, the old mozo

from Mayor's House (Miguel had been there long before Hart Thorin's time and

would likely be there long after Thorin had gone back to his ranch) showed up at

the house Susan shared with her aunt. He was leading a beautiful chestnut mare by

a hack'. It was the second of the three promised horses, and Susan recognized

Felicia at once. The mare had been one other childhood's favorite.

Susan embraced Miguel and covered his bearded cheeks with kisses. The old

man's wide grin would have showed every tooth in his head, if he'd had any left to

show. "Gracias, gracias, a thousand thanks, old father," she told him.

"Da na?da, " he replied, and handed her the bri?dle. "It is the Mayor's earnest gift."

She watched him away, the smile slowly fading from her lips. Felicia stood

docilely beside her, her dark brown coat shining like a dream

in the sum?mer
sun?light. But this was no dream. It had seemed like one at first
— that sense of
un?re?al?ity had been an?oth?er in?duce?ment to walk in?to the
trap, she now
un?der?stood—but it was no dream. She had been proved hon?
est; now she found
her?self the re?cip?ient of “earnest gifts” from a rich man. The
phrase was a sop to
con?ven?tion?al?ity, of course ... or a bit?ter joke, de?pend ing
on one’s mood and
out?look. Fe?li?cia was no more a gift than Py?lon had been—
they were step-?by-?step
ful?fill?ments of the con?tract in?to which she had en?tered.
Aunt Cord could ex?press
shock, but Su?san knew the truth: what lay di?rect?ly ahead was
whor?ing, pure and
sim?ple.
Aunt Cord was in the kitchen win?dow as Su?san walked her gift
(which was re?al?ly
just re?turned prop?er?ty, in her view) to the sta?ble. She called
out some?thing pass?ing
cheery about how the horse was a good thing, that car?ing for it
would give Su?san
less time for her megrims. Su?san felt a hot re?ply rise to her
lips and held it back.
There had been a wary truce be?tween the two of them since the
shout?ing match
about the shirts, and Su?san didn’t want to be the one to break
it. There was too
much on her mind and heart. She thought that one more ar?gu?
ment with her aunt
and she might sim?ply snap like a dry twig un?der a boot. Be?
cause of?ten si?lence is
best, her fa?ther had told her when, at age ten or so, she had
asked him why he was
al?ways so qui?et. The an?swer had puz?zled her then, but now
she un?der?stood bet?ter.
She sta?bled Fe?li?cia next to Py?lon, rubbed her down, fed her.
While the mare
munched oats, Su?san ex?am?ined her hooves. She didn’t care
much for the look of
the iron the mare was wear?ing—that was Seafront for you—
and so she took her
fa?ther’s shoe?bag from its nail be?side the sta ble door, slung

the strap over her head

and shoulder so the bag hung on her hip, and walked the two miles to Hockey's

Stable and Fancy Livery. Feeling the leather bag bang against her hip brought

back her father in a way so fresh and clear that grief pricked her again and made

her feel like crying. She thought he would have been appalled at her current

situation, perhaps even disgusted. And he would have liked Will Dearborn, of that

she was sure—liked him and approved of him for her. It was the final miserable

touch.

2

She had known how to shoe most of her life, and even enjoyed it, when her mood

was right; it was dusty, elemental work, with always the possibility of a healthy

kick in the slats to relieve the boredom and bring a girl back to reality. But of

making shoes she knew nothing, nor wished to. Brian Hookey made them at the

forge behind his barn and hostelry, how ever; Susan easily picked out four new

ones of the right size, enjoying the smell of horseflesh and fresh hay as she did.

Fresh paint, too. Hockey's Stable & Smithy looked very well, indeed. Glancing up,

she saw not so much as a single hole in the barn roof. Times had been good for

Hookey, it seemed.

He wrote the new shoes up on a beam, still wearing his blacksmith's apron and

squinting horribly out of one eye at his own figures. When Susan began to speak

haltingly to him about payment, he laughed, told her he knew she'd settle her

accounts as soon as she could, gods bless her, yes. 'Sides, they weren't any of them

going anywhere, were they? Nawp, nawp. All the time gently prodding her

through the fragrant smells of hay and horses toward the door. He would not have

treated even so small a matter as four iron shoes in such a

care?free man?ner a year

ago, but now she was May?or Thorin's good friend, and things had changed.

The af?ter?noon sun?light was daz?zling af?ter the dim?ness of Hock?ey's barn, and she

was mo?men?tar?ily blind?ed, grop?ing for?ward to?ward the street with the leather bag

bounc?ing on her hip and the shoes clash?ing soft?ly in side. She had just a mo?ment

to reg?is?ter a shape loom?ing in the bright?ness, and then it thumped in?to her hard

enough to rat?tle her teeth and make Fe li?cia's new shoes clang. She would have

fall?en, but for strong hands that quick?ly reached out and grasped her shoul?ders. By

then her eyes were ad just?ing and she saw with dis?may and amuse?ment that the

young man who had al?most knocked her sprawl?ing in?to the dirt was one of Will's

friends— Richard Stock?worth.

"Oh, sai, your par?don!" he said, brush?ing the arms of her dress as if he had

knocked her over. "Are you well? Are you quite well?"

"Quite well," she said, smil?ing. "Please don't apol?ogize." She felt a sud?den wild

im?pulse to stand on tip?toe and kiss his mouth and say, Give that to Will and tell

him to nev?er mind what I said! Tell him there are a thou?sand more where that

came from! Tell him to come and get ev?ery one!

In?stead, she fixed on a com?ic im?age: this Richard Stock?worth smack ing Will full

on the mouth and say?ing it was from Su?san Del?ga?do. She began to gig?gle. She put

her hands to her mouth, but it did no good. Sai Stock?worth smiled back at her . . .

ten?ta?tive?ly, cau?tious?ly. He prob?ably thinks I'm mad . . . and I am! I am!

"Good day, Mr. Stock?worth," she said, and passed on be?fore she could em?bar?rass

her?self fur?ther.

"Good day, Su?san Del?ga?do," he called in re?turn.

She looked back once, when she was fifty yards or so far?ther up the street, but he

was al?ready gone. Not in?to Hock?ey's, though; of that she was

quite sure. She

wondered what Mr. Stockworth had been doing at that end of town to begin with.

Half an hour later, as she took the new iron from her dad's shoe bag, she found out.

There was a folded scrap of paper tucked between two of the shoes, and even

before she unfolded it, she understood that her collision with Mr. Stockworth

hadn't been an accident.

She recognized Will's handwriting at once from the note in the bouquet.

Susan,

Can you meet me at Citygo this evening or tomorrow evening? Very important. Has

to do with what we discussed before. Please.

W.

P.S. Best you burn this note.

She burned it at once, and as she watched the flames first flash up and then die

down, she murmured over and over the one word in it which had struck her the

hardest: Please.

3

She and Aunt Cord ate a simple, silent evening meal—bread and soup— and when

it was done, Susan rode Felicia out to the Drop and watched the sun go down. She

would not be meeting him this evening, no. She already owed too much sorrow to

impulsive, unthinking behavior. But tomorrow?

Why Citygo?

Has to do with what we discussed before.

Yes, probably. She did not doubt his honor, although she had much come to

wonder if he and his friends were who they said they were. He probably did want

to see her for some reason which bore on his mission (although how the oil patch

could have anything to do with too many horses on the Drop she did not know),

but there was something between them now, something sweet and dangerous.

They might start off talking but would likely end up kissing ... and kissing would

just be the start. Know?ing didn't change feel?ing, though; she want?ed to see him.

Need?ed to see him.

So she sat astride her new horse—an?oth?er of Hart Thorin's pay?ments-in-ad?vance

on her vir?gin?ity—and watched the sun swell and turn red in the west. She lis?tened

to the faint grum?ble of the thin?ny, and for the first time in her six?teen years was

tru?ly torn by in?de?ci?sion. All she want?ed stood against all she be?lieved of hon?or,

and her mind roared with con?flict. Around all, like a ris?ing wind around an

un?sta?ble house, she felt the idea of ka grow?ing. Yet to give over one's hon?or for

that rea?son was so easy, wasn't it? To ex?cuse the fall of virtue by in?vok?ing all-

pow?er?ful ka. It was soft think?ing.

Su?s?an felt as blind as she'd been when leav?ing the dark?ness of Bri?an Hock?ey's bam

for the bright?ness of the street. At one point she cried silent?ly in frus?tra?tion

with?out even be?ing aware of it, and per?vad?ing her ev?ery ef?fort to think clear?ly and

ra?tio?nal?ly was her de?sire to kiss him again, and to feel his hand cup?ping her breast.

She had nev?er been a re?li?gious girl, had lit?tle faith in the dim gods of Mid?-World,

so at the last of it, with the sun gone and the sky above its point of ex?it go?ing from

red to pur?ple, she tried to pray to her fa?ther. And an an?swer came, al?though

whether from him or from her own heart she didn't know.

Let ka mind it?self, the voice in her mind said. It will, any?way; it al ways does. If

ka. should over?rule your hon?or, so it will be; in the mean time, Su?s?an, there's no

one to mind it but your?self. Let ka go and mind the virtue of your promise, hard as

that may be.

"All right," she said. In her cur?rent state she dis?cov?ered that any de?ci sion—even

one that would cost her an?oth?er chance to see Will—was a relief. "I'll hon?or my

promise. Ka can take care of it?self."

In the gath?er?ing shad?ows, she clucked side?mouth to Fe?li?cia and turned for home.

4

The next day was San?day, the tra?di?tion?al cow?boys' day of rest. Roland's lit?tle band

took this day off as well. "It's fair enough that we should," Cuth?bert said, "since

we don't know what the hell we're do?ing in the first place."

On this par?tic?ular San?day—their sixth since com?ing to Ham?bry— Cuth?bert was in

the up?per mar?ket (low?er mar?ket was cheap?er, by and large, but too fishy-?smelling

for his lik?ing), look?ing at bright?ly col?ored scrapes and try?ing not to cry. For his

moth?er had a ser?ape, it was a great fa?vorite oth?ers, and think?ing of how she would

ride out some?times with it flow?ing back from her shoul?ders had filled him with

home?sick?ness so strong it was sav?age. "Arthur Heath," Roland's ka-?mai, miss?ing

his ma?ma so bad?ly his eyes were wet! It was a joke wor?thy of... well, wor?thy of

Cuth?bert All?go?od.

As he stood so, look?ing at the ser?apes and a hang?ing rack of dolina blan?kets with

his hands clasped be?hind his back like a pa?tron in an art gallery (and blink?ing back

tears all the while), there came a light tap on his shoul?der. He turned, and there

was the girl with the blonde hair.

Cuth?bert wasn't sur?prised that Roland was smit?ten with her. She was noth?ing short

of breath?tak?ing, even dressed in jeans and a farmshirt. Her hair was tied back with

a se?ries of rough rawhide han?ks, and she had eyes of the bright?est gray Cuth?bert

had ev?er seen. Cuth?bert thought it was a won?der that Roland had been able to

con?tin?ue with any oth?er as?pect of his life at all, even down to the wash?ing of his

teeth. Cer?tain?ly she came with a cure for Cuth?bert; sen?ti?men?tal thoughts of his

moth?er dis?ap?peared in an in?stant.

"Sai," he said. It was all he could man?age, at least to start with.

She nod?ded and held out what the folk of Mejis called a

corvette— "lit?tle pack?et"

was the lit?er?al def?ini?tion; "lit?tle purse" was the prac?ti?cal one. These small leather

ac?ces?sories, big enough for a few coins but not much more, were more of?ten

car?ried by ladies than gen?tle?men, al?though that was not a hard-?and-?fast rule of

fash?ion.

"Ye dropped this, cul?ly," she said.

"Nay, thankee-?sai." This one well might have been the prop?er?ty of a man—plain

black leather, and un?adorned by foo?fraws—but he had nev?er seen it be?fore. Nev?er

car?ried a corvette, for that mat?ter.

"It's yours," she said, and her eyes were now so in?tense that her gaze felt hot on his

skin. He should have un?der?stood at once, but he had been blind?ed by her

un?ex?pect?ed ap?pear?ance. Al?so, he ad?mit?ted, by her clever ness. You some?how

didn't ex?pect clev?er?ness from a girl this beau?ti?ful; beau?ti?ful girls did not, as a rule,

have to be clever. So far as Bert could tell, all beau?ti?ful girls had to do was wake

up in the morn?ing. "It is."

"Oh, aye," he said, al?most snatch?ing the lit?tle purse from her. He could feel a

fool?ish grin over?spread?ing his face. "Now that you men?tion it, sai—"

"Su?san." Her eyes were grave and watch?ful above her smile. "Let me be Su?san to

you, I pray."

"With plea?sure. I cry your par?don, Su?san, it's just that my mind and mem?ory,

re?al?iz?ing it's San?day, have joined hands and gone off on hol?iday to?geth?er—eloped,

you might say—and left me tem?porar?ily with?out a brain in my head."

He might well have rat?tled on like that for an?oth?er hour (he had be fore; to that

both Roland and Alain could tes?ti?fy), but she stopped him with the easy brisk?ness

of an old?er sis?ter. "I can eas?ily be?lieve ye have no con?trol over yer mind, Mr.

Heath—or the tongue hung be?low it- but per haps ye'll take

bet?ter care of yer

purse in the fu?ture. Good day.” She was gone be?fore he could get an?oth?er word

out.

5

Bert found Roland where he so of?ten was these days: out on the part of the Drop

that was called Town Look?out by many of the lo?cals. It gave a fair view of

Ham?bry, dream?ing away its San?day af?ter?noon in a blue haze, but Cuth?bert rather

doubt?ed the Ham?bry view was what drew his old?est friend back here time af?ter

time. He thought that its view of the Del?ga?do house was the more like?ly rea?son.

This day Roland was with Alain, nei?ther of them say?ing a word. Cuth?bert had no

trou?ble ac?cept?ing the idea that some peo?ple could go long pe?ri?ods of time with?out

talk?ing to each oth?er, but he did not think he would ev?er un?der?stand it.

He came rid?ing up to them at a gal?lop, reached in?side his shirt, and pulled out the

corvette. “From Su?san Del?ga?do. She gave it to me in the up?per mar?ket. She’s

beau?ti?ful, and she’s al?so as wily as a snake. I say that with ut?most ad?mi?ra?tion.”

Roland’s face filled with light and life. When Cuth?bert tossed him the corvette, he

caught it one-?hand?ed and pulled the lace-?tie with his teeth. In side, where a

trav?el?ling man would have kept his few scraps of mon?ey, there was a sin?gle fold?ed

piece of pa?per. Roland read this quick?ly, the light go?ing out of his eyes, the smile

fad?ing off his mouth.

“What does it say?” Alain asked.

Roland hand?ed it to him and then went back to look?ing out at the Drop. It wasn’t

un?til he saw the very re?al des?ola?tion in his friend’s eyes that Cuth?bert ful?ly re?al?ized

how far in?to Roland’s life—and hence in?to all their lives—Su?san Del?ga?do had

come.

Alain hand?ed him the note. It was on?ly a sin?gle line, two

sen?tences:

It's best we don't meet. I'm sor?ry.

Cuth?bert read it twice, as if reread?ing might change it, then hand?ed it back to

Roland. Roland put the note back in?to the corvette, tied the lace, and then tucked

the lit?tle purse in?to his own shirt.

Cuth?bert hat?ed si?lence worse than dan?ger (it was dan?ger, to his mind), but ev?ery

con?ver?sa?tion?al open?ing he tried in his mind seemed cal?low and un?feel?ing, giv?en

the look on his friend's face. It was as if Roland had been poi?soned. Cuth?bert was

dis?gust?ed at the thought of that love?ly young girl bump?ing hips with the long and

bony May?or of Ham?bry, but the look on Roland's face now called up stronger

emo?tions. For that he could hate her.

At last Alain spoke up, al?most timid?ly. "And now, Roland? Shall we have a hunt

out there at the oil?patch with?out her?"

Cuth?bert ad?mired that. Up?on first meet?ing him, many peo?ple dis missed Alain

Johns as some?thing of a dullard. That was very far from the truth. Now, in a

diplo?mat?ic way Cuth?bert could nev?er have matched, he had point?ed out that

Roland's un?hap?py first ex?pe?ri?ence with love did not change their re?spon?si?bil?ities.

And Roland re?spond?ed, rais?ing him?self off the sad?dle-?horn and sit?ting up straight.

The strong gold?en light of that sum?mer's af?ter?noon lit his face in harsh con?trasts,

and for a mo?ment that face was haunt?ed by the ghost of the man he would be?come.

Cuth?bert saw that ghost and shiv?ered—not know?ing what he saw, on?ly know?ing

that it was aw?ful.

"The Big Cof?fin Hunters," he said. "Did you see them in town?"

"Jonas and Reynolds," Cuth?bert an?swered. "Still no sign of De?pape. I think Jonas

must have choked him and thrown him over the sea cliffs in a fit of pique af?ter that

night in the bar."

Roland shook his head. "Jonas needs the men he trusts too much

to waste

them—he's as far out on thin ice as we are. No, De?pape's just been sent off for awhile."

"Sent where?" Alain asked.

"Where he'll have to shit in the bushes and sleep in the rain if the weather's bad."

Roland laughed shortly, without much humor. "Jonas has got De?pape running our back?trail, more likely than not."

Alain grunted softly, in surprise that wasn't really surprise. Roland sat easily

astride Rusher, looking out over the dreamy depths of land, at the grazing horses.

With one hand he unconsciously rubbed the corvette he had tucked into his shirt.

At last he looked around at them again.

"We'll wait a bit longer," he said. "Perhaps she'll change her mind."

"Roland—" Alain began, and his tone was dead?ly in its gentleness.

Roland raised his hands before Alain could go on. "Doubt me not, Alain—I speak as my father's son."

"All right." Alain reached out and briefly gripped Roland's shoulder. As for

Cuthbert, he reserved judgment. Roland might or might not be acting as his

father's son; Cuthbert guessed that at this point Roland hardly knew his own mind at all.

"Do you remember what Cort used to say was the primary weakness of mag?gots

such as us?" Roland asked with a trace of a smile.

" 'You run without consideration and fall in a hole,' " Alain quoted in a gruff

imitation that made Cuthbert laugh aloud.

Roland's smile broadened a touch. "Aye. They're words I mean to remember,

boys. I'll not upset this cart in order to see what's in it ... not unless there's no other

choice. Susan may come around yet, given time to think. I believe she would have

agreed to meet me already, if not for ... other matters between us."

He paused, and for a little while there was quiet among them.

"I wish our fathers hadn't sent us," Alain said at last... although it was Roland's

father who had sent them, and all three knew it. "We're too young for matters such as these. Too young by years."

"We did all right that night in the Rest," Cuthbert said.

"That was training, not guile—and they didn't take us seriously. That won't happen again."

"They wouldn't have sent us—not my father, not yours—if they'd known what

we'd find," Roland said. "But now we've found it, and now we're for it. Yes?"

Alain and Cuthbert nodded. They were for it, all right—there no longer seemed any doubt of that.

"In any case, it's too late to worry about it now. We'll wait and hope for Susan. I'd

rather not go near Citigo without some one from Hambray who knows the lay of the

place ... but if Depape comes back, we'll have to take our chance. God knows what

he may find out, or what stories he may invent to please Jonas, or what Jonas may

do after they palaver. There may be shooting."

"After all this creeping around, I'd almost welcome it," Cuthbert said.

"Will you send her another note, Will Dearborn?" Alain asked.

Roland thought about it. Cuthbert laid an interesting bet with himself on which way

Roland would go. And lost.

"No," he said at last. "We'll have to give her time, hard as that is. And hope her

curiosity will bring her around."

With that he turned Rusher toward the abandoned bunkhouse which now served

them as home. Cuthbert and Alain followed.

6

Susan, worked herself hard the rest of that Sunday, mucking out the stables,

carrying water, washing down all the steps. Aunt Cord watched all this in silence,

her expression one of mingled doubt and amazement. Su

san cared not a bit for

how her aunt looked—she wanted only to exhaust herself and avoid another

sleepless night. It was over. Will would know it as well now, and that was to the

good. Let done be done.

“Are ye daft, girl?” was all Aunt Cord asked her as Susan dumped her last pail of

dirty rinse-water behind the kitchen. “It’s Sunday!”

“Not daft a bit,” she replied shortly, without looking around.

She accomplished the first half of her aim, going to bed just after moonrise with

tired arms, aching legs, and a throbbing back—but sleep still did not come. She

lay in bed wide-eyed and unhappy. The hours passed, the moon set, and still Susan

couldn’t sleep. She looked into the dark and wondered if there was any possibility,

even the slightest, that her father had been murdered. To stop his mouth, to close

his eyes.

Finally she reached the conclusion Roland had already come to: if there had been

no attraction for her in those eyes of his, or the touch of his hands and lips, she

would have agreed in a flash to the meeting he wanted. If only to set her troubled

mind to rest.

At this realization, relief overspread her and she was able to sleep.

7

Late the next afternoon, while Roland and his friends were at fives in the

Travellers’ Rest (cold beef sandwiches and gallons of white iced tea—not as good

as that made by Deputy Dave’s wife, but not bad), Sheemie came in from outside,

where he had been watering his flowers. He was wearing his pink sombrero and a

wide grin. In one hand he held a little packet.

“Hello, there, you Little Coffin Hunters!” he cried cheerfully, and made a bow

which was an amusingly good imitation of their own. Cuthbert particularly

enjoyed seeing such a bow done in gardening sandals.

“How be you? Well, I’m
hop?ing, so I do!”

“Right as rain?bar?rels,” Cuth?bert said, “but none of us en?joys
be?ing called Lit?tle

Cof?fin Hunters, so maybe you could just play soft on that, all
right?”

“Aye,” Sheemie said, as cheer?ful as ev?er. “Aye, Mr. Arthur
Heath, good fel?la who

saved my life!” He paused and looked puz?zled for a mo ment,
as if un?able to

re?mem?ber why he had ap?proached them in the first place.
Then his eyes cleared,

his grin shone out, and he held the pack?et out to Roland. “For
you, Will

Dear?born!”

“Re?al?ly? What is it?”

“Seeds! So they are!”

“From you, Sheemie?”

“Oh, no.”

Roland took the pack?et—just an en?ve?lope which had been
fold?ed over and sealed.

There was noth?ing writ?ten on the front or back, and the tips of
his fin?gers felt no
seeds with?in.

“Who from, then?”

“Can’t re?mem?ber,” said Sheemie, who then cast his eyes aside.
His brains had been

stirred just enough, Roland re?flect?ed, so that he would nev?er
be un?hap?py for long,

and would nev?er be able to lie at all. Then his eyes, hope?ful
and timid, came back

to Roland’s. “I re?mem?ber what I was sup?posed to say to you,
though.”

“Aye? Then say it, Sheemie.”

Speak?ing as one who re?cites a painful?ly mem?orized line,
both proud and ner?vous,

he said: “These are the seeds you scat?tered on the Drop.”

Roland’s eyes blazed so fierce?ly that Sheemie stum?bled back a
step. He gave his

som?brero a quick tug, turned, and hur?ried back to the safe?ty
of his flow?ers. He

liked Will Dear?born and Will’s friends (es?pe?cial?ly Mr. Arthur
Heath, who

some?times said things that made Sheemie laugh fit to split), but
in that mo?ment he

saw some?thing in Will?sai's eyes that fright ened him bad?ly.

In that in?stant he

un?der?stood that Will was as much a killer as the one in the cloak, or the one who

had want?ed Sheemie to lick his boots clean, or old white-haired Jonas with the

trem?bly voice.

As bad as them, or even worse.

8

Roland slipped the "seed-?pack?et" in?to his shirt and didn't open it un?til the three of

them were back on the porch of the Bar K. In the dis?tance, the thin?ny grum?bled,

mak?ing their hors?es twitch their ears ner?vous?ly.

"Well?" Cuth?bert asked at last, un?able to re?strain him?self any longer. Roland took

the en?ve?lope from in?side his shirt, and tore it open. As he did, he re?flect?ed that

Su?sana had known ex?act?ly what to say. To a nice?ty.

The oth?ers bent in, Alain (mm his left and Cuth?bert from his right, as he un?fold?ed

the sin?gle scrap of pa?per. Again he saw her sim?ple, neat?ly made writ?ing, the

mes?sage not much longer than the pre?vi?ous one. Very dif?fer?ent in con?tent,

how?ev?er.

There is an or?ange grove a mile off the road on the town side of Cit?go. Meet me

there at moon?rise. Come alone. S.

And be?low that, print?ed in em?phat?ic lit?tle let?ters: burn this.

"We'll keep a look?out," Alain said.

Roland nod?ded. "Aye. But from a dis?tance."

Then he burned the note.

9

The or?ange grove was a neat?ly kept rect?an?gle of about a dozen rows at the end of a

part?ly over?grown cart-?track. Roland ar?rived there af?ter dark but still a good half

hour be?fore the rapid?ly thin?ning Ped?dler would haul him self over the hori?zon

once more.

As the boy wan?dered along one of the rows, lis?ten?ing to the some?how skele?tal

sounds from the oil?patch to the north (squeal?ing pis?tons,

grind?ing gears, thud?ding

drive?shafts), he was struck by deep home?sick?ness. It was the frag?ile fra?grance of

or?ange-?blos?soms—a bright run?ner laid over the dark?er stench of oil—that brought

it on. This toy grove was noth?ing like the great ap?ple or?chards of New Canaan . . .

ex?cept some?how it was. There was the same feel?ing of dig?ni?ty and civ?iliza?tion

here, of much time de?vot?ed to some?thing not strict?ly nec?sary. And in this case,

he sus?pect?ed, not very use?ful, ei?ther. Or?anges grown this far north of the warm

lat?itudes were prob?ably al?most as sour as lemons. Still, when the breeze stirred the

trees, the smell made him think of Gilead with bit?ter long?ing, and for the first time

he con?sidered the pos?si?bil?ity that he might nev?er see home again—that he had

be?come as much a wan?der?er as old Ped?dler Moon in the sky.

He heard her, but not un?til she was al?most on top of him—if she'd been an en?emy

in?stead of a friend, he might still have had time to draw and fire, but it would have

been close. He was filled with ad?mi?ra?tion, and as he saw her face in the starlight,

he felt his heart glad?den.

She halt?ed when he turned and mere?ly looked at him, her hands linked be?fore her

at her waist in a way that was sweet?ly and un?con?scious?ly child?like. He took a step

to?ward her and they came up in what he took for alarm. He stopped, con?fused. But

he had mis?read her ges?ture in the chancy light. She could have stopped then, but

chose not to. She stepped to?ward him de?lib?er?ate?ly, a tall young wom?an in a split

rid?ing skirt and plain black boots. Her som?brero hung down on her back, against

the bound rope of her hair.

“Will Dear?born, we are met both fair and ill,” she said in a trem?bling voice, and

then he was kiss?ing her; they burned against one an?oth?er as the Ped?dler rose in the

famine of its last quar?ter.

In?side her lone?ly hut high on the Coos, Rhea sat at her kitchen
ta?ble, bent over the

glass the Big Cof?fin Hunters had brought her a month and a
half ago. Her face was

bathed in its pink glow, and no one would have mis tak?en it for
the face of a girl

any longer. She had ex?traor?di?nary vi?tal?ity, and it had car?
ried her for many years

(on?ly the longest-?lived res?idents of Ham?bry had any idea of
how old Rhea of the

Coos ac?tu?al?ly was, and they on?ly the vaguest), but the glass
was fi?nal?ly sap?ping

it—suck?ing it out of her as a vam?pire sucks blood. Be?hind
her, the hut's larg?er

room was even dingi?er and more clut?tered than usu?al. These
days she had no time

for even a pre?tense of clean?ing; the glass ball took up all her
time. When she

wasn't look?ing in?to it, she was think?ing of look?ing in?to it
... and, oh! Such things

she had seen!

Er?mot twined around one of her scrawny legs, hiss?ing with
ag?ita?tion, but she

bare?ly no?ticed him. In?stead she bent even clos?er in?to the
ball's poi?son pink glow,

en?chant?ed by what she saw there.

It was the girl who had come to her to be proved hon?est, and
the young man she

had seen the first time she'd looked in?to the ball. The one she
had mis?tak?en for a

gun?slinger, un?til she had re?al?ized his youth.

The fool?ish girl, who had come to Rhea singing and left in a
more prop?er si?lence,

had proved hon?est, and might well be hon?est yet (cer?tain?ly
she kissed and touched

the boy with a vir?gin's min?gled greed and ti mid?ity), but she
wouldn't be hon?est

much longer if they kept on the way they were go?ing. And
wouldn't Hart Thorin

be in for a sur?prise when he took his sup?pos?ed?ly pure young
gilly to bed? There

were ways to fool men about that (men prac?ti?cal?ly begged to
be fooled about that),

a thim?ble of pig's blood would serve nice?ly, but she wouldn't

know that. Oh, this

was too good! And to think she could watch Miss Haughty brought low, right

here, in this won?der?ful glass! Oh, it was too good! Too won?der?ful!

She leaned clos?er still, the deep sock?ets of her eyes fill?ing with pink fire. Er?mot,

sens?ing that she re?mained im?mune to his blan?dish?ments, crawled dis?con?so?late?ly

away across the floor, in search of bugs. Musty pranced away from him, spit?ting

fe?line curs?es, his six-?legged shad?ow huge and mis?shapen on the fire?struck wall.

11

Roland sensed the mo?ment rush?ing at them. Some?how he man?aged to step away

from her, and she stepped back from him, her eyes wide and her cheeks

flushed—he could see that flush even in the light of the new?ly risen moon. His

balls were throb?bing. His groin felt full of liq?uid lead.

She half-?turned away from him, and Roland saw that her som?brero had gone

askew on her back. He reached out one trem?bling hand and straight?ened it. She

clasped his fin?gers in a brief but strong grip, then bent to pick up her rid?ing gloves,

which she had stripped off in her need to touch him skin to skin. When she stood

again, the wash of blood abrupt?ly left her face, and she reeled. But for his hands

on her shoul?ders, steady?ing her, she might have fall?en. She turned to?ward him,

eyes rue?ful.

“What are we to do? Oh, Will, what are we to do?”

“The best we can,” he said. “As we both al?ways have. As our fa?thers taught us.”

“This is mad.”

Roland, who had nev?er felt any?thing so sane in his life—even the deep ache in his

groin felt sane and right—said noth?ing.

“Do ye know how dan?ger?ous ’tis?” she asked, and went on be?fore he could re?ply.

“Aye, ye do. I can see ye do. If we were seen to?geth?er at all, ’twould be se?ri?ous. To

be seen as we just were—”

She shivered. He reached for her and she stepped back. “Best ye don’t, Will. If ye

do, won’t be nothin’ done between us but spoonin’. Un less that was your

invention?”

“You know it wasn’t.”

She nodded. “Have ye set your friends to watch?”

“Aye,” he said, and then his face opened in that unexpected smile she loved so

well. “But not where they can watch us.”

“Thank the gods for that,” she said. and laughed rather distractedly. Then she

stepped closer to him, so close that he was hard put not to take her in his arms

again. She looked curiously up into his face. “Who are you, really. Will?”

“Almost who I say I am. That’s the joke of this, Susan. My friends and I weren’t

sent here because we were drunk and belling, but we weren’t sent here to uncover

any fell plot or secret conspiracy, either. We were just boys to be put out of the

way in a time of danger. All that’s happened since—” He shook his head to show

how helpless he felt, and Susan thought again of her father saying ka was like a

wind—when it came it might take your chickens, your house, your bam. Even

your life.

“And is Will Dearborn your real name?”

He shrugged. “One name’s as good as another, I wot, if the heart that answers to it

is true. Susan, you were at Mayor’s House today, for my friend Richard saw you

ride up—”

“Aye, fittings,” she said. “For I am to be this year’s Reaping Girl— it’s Hart’s

choice, nothin’ I ever would have had on my own, mark I say it. A lot of

foolishness, and hard on Olive as well, I warrant.”

“You will make the most beautiful Reaping Girl that ever was,” he said, and the clear

sincerity in his voice made her tingle with pleasure; her cheeks grew warm again.

There were five changes of costume for the Reaping Girl between the noon feast

and the bonfire at dusk, each more elaborate than the last (in Gilead there would

have been nine; in that way, Susan didn't know how lucky she was), and she

would have worn all five happily for Will, had he been the Reaping Lad. (This

year's Lad was Jamie McCann, a palatial and whey-faced stand-in for Hart Thorin,

who was approximately forty years too old and gray for the job.) Even more

happily would she have worn the sixth—a silvery shift with wisp-thin straps and a

hem that stopped high on her thighs. This was a costume no one but Maria, her

maid, Concheta, her seamstress, and Hart Thorin would ever see. It was the one

she would be wearing when she went to the old man's couch as his gilly, after the

feast was over.

"When you were up there, did you see the ones who call themselves the Big

Coffin Hunters?"

"I saw Jonas and the one with the cloak, standing together in the courtyard and

talk-ing," she said. "Not Deppa? The red-head?" She shook her head.

"Do you know the game Castles. Susan?"

"Aye. My father showed me when I was small."

"Then you know how the red pieces stand at one end of the board and the white at

the other. How they come around the Hillocks and creep toward each other, setting

screens for cover. What's going on here in Ham-Dry is very like that. And, as in

the game, it has now become a question of who will break cover first. Do you

understand?"

She nodded at once. "In the game, the first one around his Hillock is vulnerable."

"In life, too. Always. But sometimes even staying in cover is difficult. My friends

and I have counted nearly everything we dare count. To count the rest—"

"The hors'es on the Drop, for in?stance."

"Aye, just so. To count them would be to break cov?er. Or the ox?en we know about—"

Her eye?brows shot up. "There are no ox?en in Ham?bry. Ye must be mis?tak?en about that."

"No mis?take."

"Where?"

"The Rock?ing H."

Now her eye?brows drew back down, and knit?ed in a thought?ful frown. "That's

Laslo Rimer's place."

"Aye—Kim?ba's broth?er. Nor are those the on?ly trea?sures hid?den away in Ham?bry

these days. There are ex?tra wag?ons, ex?tra tack hid?den in barns be?long?ing to

mem?bers of the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation, ex?tra caches of feed—"

"Will, no!"

"Yes. All that and more. But to count them—to be seen count?ing them—is to

break cov?er. To risk be?ing Cas?tled. Our re?cent days have been pret?ty

night?mar?ish—we try to look prof?itably busy with?out mov?ing over to the Drop side

of Ham?bry, where most of the dan?ger lies. It's hard?er and hard?er to do. Then we

re?ceived a mes?sage—"

"A mes?sage? How? From whom?"

"Best you not know those things, I think. But it's led us to be?lieve that some of the

an?swers we're look?ing for may be at Cit?go."

"Will, d'ye think that what's out here may help me to know more about what

hap?pened to my da?"

"I don't know. It's pos?si?ble, I sup?pose, but not like?ly. All I know for sure is that I

fi?nal?ly have a chance to count some?thing that mat?ters and not be seen do?ing it."

His blood had cooled enough for him to hold out his hand to her; Su?san's had

cooled enough for her to take it in good con?fi dence. She had put her glove back

on again, how?ev?er. Bet?ter safe than sor?ry.

"Come on," she said. "I know a path."

12

In the moon's pale half-light, Susan led him out of the orange grove and toward

the thump and squeak of the oilpatch. Those sounds made Roland's back prickle;

made him wish for one of the guns hidden under the bunk-house floorboards back at the Bar K.

"Ye can trust me, Will, but that doesn't mean I'll be much help to ye," she said in a

voice just a notch above a whisper. "I've been within hearing distance of Citgo my

whole life, but I could count the number of times I've actually been in it on the

fingers of both hands, so I could. The first two or three were on dares from my friends."

"And then?"

"With my da. He were always interested in the Old People, and my Aunt Cord

always said he'd come to a bad end, meddling in their leavings." She swallowed

hard. "And he did come to a bad end, although I doubt it were the Old People

re-sponsible. Poor Da."

They had reached a smooth-wire fence. Beyond it, the gantries of the oil wells

stood against the sky like sentinels the size of Lord Perth. How many had she said

were still working? Nineteen, he thought. The sound of them was ghastly—the

sound of monsters being choked to death. Of course it was the kind of place that

kids dared each other to go into; a kind of open-air haunted house.

He held two of the wires apart so she could slip between them, and she did the

same for him. As he passed through, he saw a line of white porcelain cylinders

marching down the post closest to him. A fencewire went through each.

"You understand what these are? Were?" he asked Susan, tapping one of the cylinders.

"Aye. When there was elec?tric?ity, some went through here."

She paused, then

added shy?ly: "It's how I feel when you touch me."

He kissed her cheek just be?low her ear. She shiv?ered and pressed a hand briefly

against his cheek be?fore draw?ing away. "I hope your friends will watch well."

"They will." "Is there a sig?nal?"

"The whis?tle of the nighthawk. Let's hope we don't hear it."

"Aye, be it so." She

took his hand and drew him in?to the oil?patch.

13

The first time the gas-?jet flared ahead of them, Will spat a curse un?der his breath

(an ob?scene?ly en?er?getic one she hadn't heard since her fa?ther died) and dropped

the hand not hold?ing hers to his belt.

"Be easy! It's on?ly the can?dle! The gas-?pipe!"

He re?laxed slow?ly. "That they use, don't they?"

"Aye. To run a few ma?chines—lit?tle more than toys, they are. To make ice, most?ly."

"I had some the day we met the Sher?iff."

When the flare licked out again—bright yel?low with a bluish core— he didn't

jump. He glanced at the three gas-?stor?age tanks be?hind what Ham?bry-?folk called

"the can?dle" with?out much in?ter?est. Near?by was a stack of rusty can?is?ters in which

the gas could be bot?tled and car?ried.

"You've seen such be?fore?" she asked.

He nod?ded.

"The In?ner Ba?ronies must be very strange and won?der?ful," Su?sana said. •

"I'm be?gin?ning to think they're no stranger than those of the Out?er Arc," he said,

turn?ing slow?ly. He point?ed. "What's yon build?ing down there? Left over from the

Old Peo?ple?"

"Aye."

To the east of Cit?go, the ground dropped sharply down a thick?ly wood?ed slope

with a lane cut through the mid?dle of it—this lane was as clear in the moon?light as

a part in hair. Not far from the bot?tom of the slope was a

crum?bling build?ing

sur?round?ed by rub?ble. The tum?ble-?and-?strew was the de?
tri?tus of many fall?en

smokestacks—that much could be ex?trap?olat?ed from the one
which still stood.

What?ev?er else the Old Peo?ple had done, they had made lots
of smoke.

“There were use?ful things in there when my da was a child,”
she said.

“Pa?per and such—even a few ink-?writ?ers that would still
work ... for a lit?tle while,

at least. If you shook them hard.” She point?ed to the left of the
build?ing, where

there was a vast square of crum?bled paving, and a few rust?ing
hulks that had been

the Old Peo?ple’s weird, horse?less mode of trav?el. “Once there
were things over

there that looked like the gas-?stor?age tanks, on?ly much, much
larg?er. Like huge

sil?ver cans, they were. They didn’t rust like those that are left. I
can’t think what

be?came of them, un less some?one hauled them off for wa?ter
stor?age. I nev?er

would. ‘Twould be un?lucky, even if they weren’t con?tam?inat?
ed.”

She turned her face up to his, and he kissed her mouth in the
moon?light.

”Oh, Will. What a pity this is for you.”

”What a pity for both of us,” he said, and then passed be?tween
them one of those

long and aching looks of which on?ly teenagers are ca?pa?ble.
They looked away at

last and walked on again, hand-?in-?hand.

She couldn’t de?cide which fright?ened her more—the few der?
ricks that were still

pump?ing or those dozens which had fall?en silent. One thing
she knew for sure was

that no pow?er on the face of the earth could have got ten her
with?in the fence of

this place with?out a friend close be?side her. The pumps
wheezed; ev?ery now and

then a cylin?der screamed like some one be?ing stabbed; at pe?
ri?odic in?ter?vals ”the

can?dle“ would fire off with a sound like drag?on’s breath,
throw?ing their shad?ows

out long in front of them. Su?san kept her ears pitched for the
nighthawk's pierc?ing

two-?note whis?tle, and heard noth?ing.

They came to a wide lane—what had once un?doubt?ed?ly been
a main ten?ance

road—that split the oil?patch in two. Run?ning down the cen?
ter was a steel pipe with

rust?ing joints. It lay in a deep con?crete trough, with the up?
per arc of its rusty

cir?cum?fer?ence pro?trud?ing above ground lev?el.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The pipe that took the oil to yon build?ing, I reck?on. It means
noth?ing, 'tis been

dry for years."

He dropped to one knee, slid his hand care?ful?ly in?to the
space be tween the

con?crete sleeve and the pipe's rusty side. She watched him ner
vous?ly, bit?ing her

lip to keep her?self from say?ing some?thing which would sure?
ly come out sound?ing

weak or wom?an?ish: What if there were bit?ing spi?ders down
there in the for?got?ten

dark? Or what if his hand got stuck? What would they do then?

Of that lat?ter there had been no chance, she saw when he
pulled his hand free. It

was slick and black with oil.

"Dry for years?" he asked with a lit?tle smile.

She could on?ly shake her head, be?wil?dered.

14

They fol?lowed the pipe to?ward a place where a rot?ten gate
barred the road. The

pipe (she could now see oil bleed?ing out of its old joints, even
in the weak

moon?light) ducked un?der the gate; they went over it. She
thought his hands rather

too in?ti?mate for po?lite com?pa?ny in their help?ing, and re?
joiced at each touch. If he

doesn't stop, the top of my head will ex plode like "the can?dle,
" she thought, and

laughed.

"Su?san?"

" 'Tis noth?ing, Will, on?ly nerves."

An?oth?er of those long glances passed be?tween them as they
stood on the far side

of the gate, and then they went down the hill to?geth?er. As

they walked, she noticed

an odd thing: many of the pines had been stripped of their lower branches. The

hatchet marks and scabs of pine resin were clear in the moonlight, and looked

new. She pointed this out to Will, who nodded but said nothing.

At the bottom of the hill, the pipe rose out of the ground and, supported on a

series of rusty steel cradles, ran about seventy yards toward the abandoned

building before stopping with the ragged suddenness of a battlefield ammunition.

Below this stopping point was what looked like a shallow lake of drying, tacky oil.

That it had been there for awhile Susan could tell from the numerous corpses of

birds she could see scattered across it—they had come down to investigate,

become stuck, and stayed to die in what must have been an unpleasantly leisurely

fashion.

She stared at this with wide, uncomfortable eyes until Will tapped her on the

leg. He had hunkered down. She joined him knee-to-knee and followed the

sweeping movement of his finger with growing disbelief and confusion. There

were tracks here. Very big ones. Only one thing could have made them.

“Oxen,” she said.

“Aye. They came from there.” He pointed at the place where the pipe ended. “And

they go—” He turned on the soles of his boots, still hunkered, and pointed back

toward the slope where the woods started. Now that he pointed them out, she

easily saw what she should have seen at once, horseman’s daughter that she was. A

perfunctory effort had been made to hide the tracks and the churned-up ground

where something heavy had been dragged or rolled. Time had smoothed away

more of the mess, but the marks were still clear. She even thought she knew what

the ox?en had been drag?ging, and she could see that Will knew, as well.

The tracks split off from the end of the pipe in two arcs. Su?san and “Will

Dear?born“ fol?lowed the right?hand one. She wasn’t sur?prised to see ruts min?gled in

with the tracks of the ox?en. They were shal?low—it had been a dry sum?mer, by and

large, and the ground was near?ly as hard as con?crete—but they were there. To still

be able to see them at all meant that some good?ly amount of weight had been

moved. And aye, of course; why else would ox?en be need?ed?

”Look,“ Will said as they neared the hem of for?est at the foot of the slope. She

fi?nal?ly saw what had caught his at?ten?tion, but she had to get down on her hands

and knees to do it—how sharp his eyes were! Al?most su?per?nat?ural?ly so. There

were boot?tracks here. Not fresh, but they were a lot new?er than the tracks of the

ox?en and the wheel?ruts.

”This was the one with the cape,“ he said, in?di?cat?ing a clear pair of tracks.

”Reynolds.“

”Will! Thee can’t know it!“

He looked sur?prised, then laughed. ”Sure I can. He walks with one foot turned in a

lit?tle—the left foot. And here it is.“ He stirred the air over the tracks with the tip of

his fin?ger, then laughed again at the way she was look ing at him. ” ‘Tisn’t sor?cery,

Su?san daugh?ter of Patrick; on?ly trail?craft.“

”How do ye know so much, so young?“ she asked. ”Who are ye, Will?“

He stood up and looked down in?to her eyes. He didn’t have to look far; she was

tall for a girl. ”My name’s not Will but Roland,“ he said. ”And now I’ve put my life

in your hands. That I don’t mind, but may?hap I’ve put your own life at risk, as

well. You must keep it a dead se?cret.“

”Roland,“ she said won?der?ing?ly. Tast?ing it.

”Aye. Which do you like bet?ter?“

”Your re?al one,“ she said at once. ” ‘Tis a no?ble name, so it is.“

He grinned, re?lieved, and this was the grin that made him look young again.

She raised her?self on her toes and put her lips on his. The kiss, which was chaste

and close-?mouthed to be?gin with, bloomed like a flow?er: be?came open and slow

and hu?mid. She felt his tongue touch her low?er lip and met it, shy?ly at first, with

her own. His hands cov?ered her back, then slipped around to her front. He touched

her breasts, al?so shy to be?gin with, then slid his palms up their low?er slopes to

their tips. He ut?tered a small, moan?ing sigh di?rect?ly in?to her mouth. And as he

drew her clos?er and be?gan to trail kiss?es down her neck, she felt the stone hard?ness

of him be?low the buck?le of his belt, a slim, warm length which ex?act?ly matched

the melt?ing she felt in the same place; those two places were meant for each oth?er,

as she was for him and he for her. It was ka, af?ter all—ka like the wind, and she

would go with it will?ing?ly, leav?ing all hon?or and promis?es be?hind.

She opened her mouth to tell him so, and then a queer but ut?ter?ly per sua?sive

sen?sation en?fold?ed her: they were be?ing watched. It was ridicu?lous, but it was

there; she even felt she knew who was watch?ing. She stepped back from Roland,

her boot?ed heels rock?ing un?steadily on the half-?erod?ed ox?en tracks. “Get out, ye

old bitch,” she breathed. “If ye be spy?ing on us in some way, I know not how, get

thee gone!”

15

On the hill of the Coos, Rhea drew back from the glass, spit?ting curs?es in a voice

so low and harsh that she sound?ed like her own snake. She didn’t know what

Su?sana had said—no sound came through the glass, on?ly sight—but she knew that

the girl had sensed her. And when she did, all sight had been wiped out. The glass

had flashed a bril?liant pink, then had gone dark, and none of

the pass?es she made

over it would serve to bright?en it again.

"Aye, fine, let it be so," she said at last, giv?ing up. She re?mem?bered the wretched,

pris?sy girl (not so pris?sy with the young man, though, was she?) stand?ing

hyp?no?tized in her door?way, re?mem?bered what she had told the girl to do af?ter she

had lost her maid?en?head, and be?gan to grin, all her good hu?mor re?stored. For if she

lost her maid?en?head to this wan?der?ing boy in?stead of to Hart Thorin, Lord High

May?or of Mejis, the com?edy would be even greater, would it not?

Rhea sat in the shad?ows of her stink?ing hut and be?gan to cack?le.

16

Roland stared at her, wide?eyed, and as Su?san ex?plained about Rhea a lit tle more

ful?ly (she left out the hu?mil?iat?ing fi?nal ex?am?ina?tions which lay at the heart of

"prov?ing hon?esty"), his de?sire cooled just enough for him to re?assert con?trol. It had

noth?ing to do with jeop?ar?diz?ing the po?si?tion he and his friends were try?ing to

main?tain in Ham?bry (or so he told him?self) and ev?ery?thing to do with main?tain?ing

Su?san's—her po?si?tion was im?por?tant, her hon?or even more so.

"I imag?ine it was your imag?ina?tion," he said when she had fin?ished.

"I think not." With a touch of cool?ness.

"Or con?science, even?"

At that she low?ered her eyes and said noth?ing.

"Su?san, I would not hurt you for the world."

"And ye love me?" Still with?out look?ing up.

"Aye, I do."

"Then it's best you kiss and touch me no more—not tonight. I can't stand it if ye do."

He nod?ded with?out speak?ing and held out his hand. She took it, and they walked

on in the di?rec?tion they had been go?ing when they had been so sweet?ly dis?tract?ed.

While they were still ten yards from the hem of the for?est, both

saw the slim?mer

of met?al de?spite the dense fo?liage—too dense, she thought. Too dense by far.

It was the pine-?boughs, of course; the ones which had been whacked from the

trees on the slope. What they had been in?ter?laced to cam?ou?flage were the big

sil?ver cans now miss?ing from the paved area. The sil?ver storage con?tain?ers had

been dragged over here—by the ox?en, pre?sum?ably— and then con?cealed. But

why?

Roland in?spect?ed along the line of tan?gled pine branch?es, then stopped and

plucked sev?er?al aside. This cre?at?ed an open?ing like a doorway, and he ges?tured

her to go through. “Be sharp in your looks,” he said. “I doubt if they’ve both?ered to

set traps or trip?wires, but ’tis al?ways best to be care?ful.”

Be?hind the cam?ou?flag?ing boughs, the tankers had been as neat?ly lined up as toy

sol?diers at the end of the day, and Su?san at once saw one rea?son why they had

been hid?den: they had been re-?equipped with wheels, well-made ones of sol?id oak

which came as high as her chest. Each had been rimmed with a thin iron strip. The

wheels were new, so were the strips, and the hubs had been cus?tom-?made. Su?san

knew on?ly one black?smith in Barony ca?pa?ble of such fine work: Bri?an Hookey, to

whom she had gone for Fe?li?cia’s new shoes. Bri?an Hookey, who had smiled and

clapped her on the shoul?der like a com?padre when she had come in with her da’s

shoe?bag hang?ing on her hip. Bri?an Hookey, who had been one of Pat Del?ga?do’s

best friends.

She re?called look?ing around and think?ing that times had been good for sai

Hookey, and of course she had been right. Work in the black?smithing line had

been plen?ti?ful. Hookey had been mak?ing lots of wheels and rims, for one thing,

and some?one must have been pay?ing him to do it. El?dred

Jonas was one

pos?si?bil?ity; Kim?ba Rimer an even bet?ter one. Hart? She sim?ply couldn't be?lieve

that. Hart had his mind—what lit?tle there was of it—fixed on oth?er mat?ters this sum?mer.

There was a kind of rough path be?hind the tankers. Roland walked slow?ly along it,

pac?ing like a preach?er with his hands clasped at the small of his back, read?ing the

in?com?pre?hen?si?ble words writ up?on the tankers' rear decks: cit?go. suno?co. Exxon.

cono?co. He paused once and read aloud, halt?ing?ly: "Clean?er fu?el for a bet?ter

to?mor?row." He snort?ed soft?ly. "Rot! This is to?mor?row."

"Roland—Will, I mean—what are they for? "

He didn't an?swer at first, but turned and walked back down the line of bright steel

cans. Four?teen on this side of the mys?te?ri?ous?ly re?ac?ti?vat?ed oil?-sup?ply pipe, and,

she as?sured, a like num?ber on the oth?er. As he walked, he rapped his fist on the

side of each. The sound was dull and clunky. They were full of oil from the Cit?go

oil?patch.

"They were trigged quite some time ago, I imag?ine," he said. "I doubt if the Big

Cof?fin Hunters did it all them?selves, but they no doubt over? saw it ... first the

fit?ting of the new wheels to re?place the old rot?ten rub?ber ones, then the fill?ing.

They used the ox?en to line them up here, at the base of the hill, be?cause it was

con?ve?nient. As it's con?ve?nient to let the ex?tra hors?es run free out on the Drop.

Then, when we came, it seemed pru?dent to take the pre?cau?tion of cov?er?ing these

up. Stupid ba?bies we might be, but per?haps smart enough to won?der about twen?ty-

eight load?ed oil?-carts with new wheels. So they came out here and cov?ered them."

"Jonas, Reynolds, and De?pape."

"Aye."

"But why?" She took him by the arm and asked her ques?tion again. "What are they

for? ”

“For Par?son,” Roland said with a calm he didn’t feel. “For the Good Man. The

Af?fil?ia?tion knows he’s found a num?ber of war-?ma?chines; they come ei?ther from

the Old Peo?ple or from some oth?er where. Yet the Af?fil?ia tion fears them not,

be?cause they don’t work. They’re silent. Some feel Far?son has gone mad to put his

trust in such bro?ken things, but...”

“But may?hap they’re not bro?ken. May?hap they on?ly need this stuff. And may?hap

Far?son knows it.“

Roland nod?ded.

She touched the side of one of the tankers. Her fin?gers came away oily. She

rubbed the tips to?geth?er, smelled them, then bent and picked up a swatch of grass

to wipe her hands. ”This doesn’t work in our ma?chines. It’s been tried. It clogs

them.“

Roland nod?ded again. ”My fa—my folk in the In?ner Cres?cent know that as well.

And count on it. But if Far?son has gone to this trou?ble—and split aside a troop of

men to come and get these tankers, as we have word he has done—he ei?ther

knows a way to thin it to use?ful?ness, or he thinks he does. If he’s able to lure the

forces of the Af?fil?ia?tion in?to a bat?tle in some close lo?ca? tion where rapid re?treat is

im?pos?si?ble, and if he can use ma?chine-?weapons like the ones that go on treads, he

could win more than a bat?tle. He could slaugh?ter ten thou? sand horse-?mount?ed

fight?ing men and win the war.“

”But sure?ly yer fa?thers know this . . . ?“

Roland shook his head in frus?tra?tion. How much their fa?thers knew was one

ques?tion. What they made of what they knew was an?oth?er. What forces drove

them—ne?ces?si?ty, fear, the fan?tas?tic pride which had al?so been hand?ed down, fa?ther

to son, along the line of Arthur Eld—was yet a third. He could on?ly tell her his

clear?est sur?mise.

"I think they daren't wait much longer to strike Far?son a mor?tal blow. If they do,

the Af?fil?ia?tion will sim?ply rot out from the in?side. And if that hap?pens, a good deal of Mid-?World will go with it."

"But . . ." She paused, bit?ing her lip, shak?ing her head. "Sure?ly even Far?son must

know . . . un?der?stand ..." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "The ways of the

Old Peo?ple are the ways of death. Ev?ery?one knows that, so they do."

Roland of Gilead found him?self re?mem?ber?ing a cook named Hax, dan?gling at the

end of a rope while the rooks pecked up scat?tered bread crumbs from be?neath the

dead man's feet. Hax had died for Far?son. But be?fore that, he had poi?soned

chil?dren for Far?son.

"Death," he said, "is what John Par?son's all about."

17

In the or?chard again.

It seemed to the lovers (for so they now were, in all but the most phys?ical sense)

that hours had passed, but it had been no more than forty-?live min?utes. Sum?mer's

last moon, di?min?ished but still bright, con?tin?ued to shine above them.

She led him down one of the lanes to where she had tied her horse. Py?lon nod?ded

his head and whick?ered soft?ly at Roland. He saw the horse had been rigged for

si?lence—ev?ery buck?le padded, and the stir?rups them selves wrapped in felt.

Then he turned to Su?san.

Who can re?mem?ber the pangs and sweet?ness of those ear?ly years? We re?mem?ber

our first re?al love no more clear?ly than the il?lu?sions that caused us to rave dur?ing a

high fever. On that night and be?neath that fad?ing moon, Roland De?schain and

Su?san Del?ga?do were near?ly torn apart by their de?sire for each oth?er; they

floun?dered for what was right and ached with feel?ings that were both des?per?ate

and deep.

All of which is to say that they stepped toward each other, stepped back, looked

into each other's eyes with a kind of helplessness, stepped forward again,

and stopped. She remembered what he had said with a kind of horror: that he

would do anything for her but share her with another man. She would

not—perhaps could not—break her promise to May or Thorin, and it seemed that

Roland would not (or could not) break it for her. And here was the most horrible

thing of all: strong as the wind of ká might be, it appeared that honor and the

promises they had made would prove stronger.

“What will ye do now?” she asked through dry lips.

“I don't know. I must think, and I must speak with my friends. Will you have

trouble with your aunt when you go home? Will she want to know where you've

been and what you've been doing?”

“Is it me you're concerned about or yourself and yer plans, Willy?”

He didn't respond, only looked at her. After a moment, Susan dropped her eyes.

“I'm sorry, that was cruel. No, she'll not tax me. I often ride at night, although not

often so far from the house.”

“She won't know how far you've ridden?”

“Nay. And these days we tread carefully around each other. It's like having two

powder magazines in the same house.” She reached out her hands. She had tucked

her gloves into her belt, and the fingers which grasped his fingers were cold.

“This'll have no good end,” she said in a whisper.

“Don't say that, Susan.”

“Aye, I do. I must. But whatever comes, I love thee, Roland.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. When he released her lips, she put them to

his ear and whispered, “If you love me, then love me. Make me break my

promise.”

For a long moment when her heart didn't beat, there was no

re?sponse from him,

and she allowed herself to hope. Then he shook his head—only the one time, but

firmly. “Su?san, I can?not.”

“Is yer honor so much greater than yer professed love for me, then? Aye? Then let

it be so.” She pulled out of his arms, beginning to cry, ignoring his hand on her

boot as she swung up into the saddle—his low call to wait, as well. She yanked

free the slip?knot with which Py?lon had been tethered and turned him with one

spurless foot. Roland was still calling to her, louder now, but she flung Py?lon into

a gallop and away from him before her brief flare of rage could go out. He would

not take her used, and her promise to Thorin had been made before she knew

Roland walked the face of the earth. That being so, how dare he insist that the loss

of honor and consequent shame be hers alone? Later, lying in her sleepless bed,

she would realize he had insisted nothing. And she was not even clear of the

orange grove before raising her left hand to the side of her face, feeling the

wetness there, and realizing that he had been crying, too.

18

Roland rode the lanes outside town until well past moonset, trying to get his

roaring emotions under some kind of control. He would wonder for awhile what

he was going to do about their discovery at Citgo, and then his thoughts would

shift to Su?san again. Was he a fool for not taking her when she wanted to be

taken? For not sharing what she wanted to share? If you love me, then love me.

Those words had nearly torn him open. Yet in the deep rooms of his heart rooms

where the clearest voice was that of his father he felt he had not been wrong. Nor

was it just a matter of honor, whatever she might think. But let her think that if she

would; better she should hate him a little, perhaps, than re?

al?ize how deep the

dan?ger was for both of them.

Around three o' the clock, as he was about to turn for the Bar K,
he heard the rapid

drum?ming of hoof?beats on the main road, ap?proach?ing from
the west. With?out

think?ing about why it seemed so im?por?tant to do so, Roland
swung back in that

di?rec?tion, then brought Rush?er to a stop be hind a high line
of run?-to?-ri?ot hedges.

For near?ly ten min?utes the sound of the hoof?beats con?tin?
ued to swell—sound

car?ried far in the deep qui?et of ear?ly morn?ing—and that was
quite enough time for

Roland to feel he knew who was rid?ing to?ward Ham?bry hell-?
for?-leather just two

hours be fore dawn. Nor was he mis?tak?en. The moon was
down, but he had no

trou?ble, even through the bram?bly in?ter?stices of the hedge,
rec?og?niz?ing Roy

De?pape. By dawn the Big Cof?fin Hunters would be three again.

Roland turned Rush?er back the way he had been head?ing, and
rode to re?join his

own friends.

CHAP?TER X

BIRD AND BEAR AND

HARE AND FISH

1

The most im?por?tant day of Su?san Del?ga?do's life—the day
up?on which her life

turned like a stone up?on a piv?ot—came about two weeks af?
ter her moon?lit tour of

the oil?patch with Roland. Since then she had seen him on?ly
half a dozen times,

al?ways at a dis?tance, and they had raised their hands as pass?
ing ac?quain?tances do

when their er?rands bring them briefly in?to sight of one an?
oth?er. Each time this

hap?pened, she felt a pain as sharp as a knife twist?ing in her ...
and though it was no

doubt cru?el, she hoped he felt the same twist of the knife. If
there was any?thing

good about those two mis?er?able weeks, it was on?ly that her
great fear—that gos?sip

might be?gin about her?self and the young man who called him?

self Will

Dear born—sub?sid?ed, and she found her?self ac?tu?al?ly sor?ry to feel it ebb. Gos sip?

There was noth?ing to gos?sip about.

Then, on a day be?tween the pass?ing of the Ped?dler's Moon and the rise of the

Huntress, ka fi?nal?ly came and blew her away—house and barn and all. It be?gan

with some?one at the door.

2

She had been fin?ish?ing the wash?ing—a light enough chore with on?ly two wom?en

to do it for—when the knock came.

“If it's the rag?man, send him away, ye mind!” Aunt Cord called from the oth?er

room, where she was turn?ing bed linen.

But it wasn't the rag?man. It was Maria, her maid from Seafront, look ing woe?ful.

The sec?ond dress Su?san was to wear on Reap?ing Day—the silk meant for

lun?cheon at May?or's House and the Con?ver?sa?tion?al af?ter-?ward—was ru?ined, Maria

said, and she was in hack be?cause of it. Would be sent back to On?nie's Ford if she

wasn't lucky, and she the on?ly sup?port of her moth?er and fa?ther— oh, it was hard,

much too hard, so it was. Could Su?san come? Please?

Su?san was hap?py to come—was al?ways hap?py to get out of the house these days,

and away from her aunt's shrewish, nag?ging voice. The clos?er Reap?ing came, the

less she and Aunt Cord could abide each oth?er, it seemed.

They took Py?lon, who was hap?py enough to car?ry two girls rid?ing dou?ble through

the morn?ing cool, and Maria's sto?ry was quick?ly told. Su san un?der?stood al?most at

once that Maria's po?si?tion at Seafront wasn't re?al?ly in much jeop?ardy; the lit?tle

dark-?haired maid had sim?ply been us?ing her in?nate (and rather charm?ing) pen?chant

for cre?at?ing dra?ma out of what was re?al?ly not very dra?matic at all.

The sec?ond Reap?ing dress (which Su?san thought of as Blue Dress With Beads; the

first, her break?fast dress, was White Dress With High Waist and

Puffed Sleeves)

had been kept apart from the others—it needed a bit of work yet—and something

had gotten into the first-floor sewing room and gnawed it pretty much to rags. If

this had been the costume she was to wear to the bonfire lighting, or the one she

was to wear to the ball room dance after the bonfire had been lit, the matter would

indeed have been serious. But Blue Dress With Beads was essential just a

fancified day receiving dress, and could easily be replaced in the two months

between now and the Reap. Only two! Once—on the night the old witch had

granted her her reprieve—it had seemed like eons before she would have to begin

her bedservice to May or Thorin. And now it was only two months! She twisted in

a kind of involuntary protest at the thought.

“Mum?” Maria asked. Susan wouldn’t allow the girl to call her sai, and Maria, who

seemed incapable of calling her mistress by her given name, had settled on this

compromise. Susan found the term amusing, given the fact that she was only

sixteen, and Maria herself probably just two or three years older. “Mum, are you

all right?”

“Just a crick in my back, Maria, that’s all.”

“Aye, I get those. Fair bad, they are. I’ve had three aunts who’ve died of the

wasting disease, and when I get those twinges, I’m always afraid that—”

“What kind of animal chewed up Blue Dress? Do ye know?”

Maria leaned forward so she could speak confidentially into her mistress’s ear, as

if they were in a crowded marketplace alley instead of on the road to Seafront. “It’s

put about that a raccoon got in through a window that ‘us opened during the heat

of the day and was then forgot at day’s end, but I had a good sniff of that room,

and Kimba Rimer did, too, when he came down to inspect. Just before he sent me

af?ter you, that was.”

“What did you smell?”

Maria leaned close again, and this time she ac?tu?al?ly whis?pered, al though there

was no one on the road to over?hear: “Dog farts.”

There was a mo?ment of thun?der?struck si?lence, and then Su?san be?gan to laugh. She

laughed un?til her stom?ach hurt and tears went stream?ing down her cheeks.

“Are ye say?ing that W-?W-?Wolf... the May?or’s own d-?d-?dog ... got in?to the

down?stairs seam?stress’s clos?et and chewed up my Con?ver?sa?tion?al d-d—” But she

couldn’t fin?ish. She was sim?ply laugh?ing too hard.

“Aye,” Maria said stout?ly. She seemed to find noth?ing un?usu?al about Su?san’s

laugh?ter . . . which was one of the things Su?san loved about her. “But he’s not to be

blamed, so I say, for a dog will fol?low his nat?ural in stincts, if the way is open for

him to do so. The down?stairs maids—“ She broke off. ”You’d not tell the May?or or

Kim?ba Rimer this, I sup?pose, Mum?”

”Maria, I’m shocked at you—ye play me cheap.“

”No, Mum, I play ye dear, so I do, but it’s al?ways best to be safe. All I meant to

say was that, on hot days, the down?stairs maids some?times go in?to that sewing

clos?et for their fives. It lies di?rect?ly in the shad?ow of the watch?tow?er, ye know,

and is the coolest room in the house—even cool?er than the main re?ceiv?ing rooms.“

”I’ll re?mem?ber that,” Su?san said. She thought of hold?ing the Lun cheon and

Con?ver?sa?tion?al in the seam?stress’s beck be?yond the kitchen when the great day

came, and be?gan to gig?gle again. ”Go on.“

”No more to say, Mum,” Maria told her, as if all else were too ob?vi ous for

con?ver?sa?tion. ”The maids eat their cakes and leave the crumbs. I reck?on Wolf

smelled em and this time the door was left open. When the crumbs was gone, he

tried the dress. For a sec?ond course, like.”

This time they laughed to?geth?er.

But she wasn't laugh^{ing} when she came home.

Cordelia Del^{ga}do, who thought the hap^{pi}est day of her life would be the one when

she fi^{nal}ly saw her trou^{ble}some niece out the door and the an^{noy}ing busi^{ness}

oth^{er} de^{flo}ration fi^{nal}ly over, bolt^{ed} out oth^{er} chair and hur^{ried} to the kitchen

win^{dow} when she heard the gal^{lop} of ap proach^{ing} hoofs about two hours af^{ter}

Su^{san} had left with that lit^{tle} scrap of a maid to have one of her dress^{es} re^{fit}ted.

She nev^{er} doubt^{ed} that it was Su^{san} re^{turn}ing, and she nev^{er} doubt^{ed} it was

trou^{ble}. In or^{di}nary cir cum^{stances}, the sil^{ly} twist would nev^{er} gal^{lop} one of her

beloved hors^{es} on a hot day.

She watched, ner^{vous}ly dry^{-wash}ing her hands, as Su^{san} pulled Py lon up in a

very un^{Del}ga^{do}-like scrunch, then dis^{mount}ed in an un^{la}dy like leap. Her braid

had come half un^{done}, spray^{ing} that damned blonde hair that was her van^{ity} (and

her curse) in all di^{rec}tions. Her skin was pale, ex^{cept} for twin patch^{es} of col^{or}

flar^{ing} high on her cheek^{bones}. Cordelia didn't like the look of those at all. Pat had

al^{ways} flared in that same place when he was scared or an^{gry}.

She stood at the sink, now bit^{ing} her lips as well as work^{ing} her hands. Oh,

'twould be so good to see the back of that trou^{ble}some she. "Ye haven't made

trou^{ble}, have ye?" she whis^{pered} as Su^{san} pulled the sad^{dle} from Py^{lon}'s back and

then led him to^{ward} the barn. "You bet^{ter} not have, Miss Oh So Young and Pret^{ty}.

Not at this late date. You bet^{ter} not have."

When Su^{san} came in twen^{ty} min^{utes} lat^{er}, there was no sign of her aunt's strain

and rage; Cordelia had put them away as one might store a dan^{ger}ous weapon—a

gun, say—on a high clos^{et} shelf. She was back in her rock^{er}, knit^{ting}, and the face

she turned to Su^{san}'s en^{try} had a sur^{face} se ren^{ity}. She

watched the girl go to the

sink, pump cold wa?ter in?to the basin, and then splash it on her face. In?stead of

reach?ing for a tow?el to pat her self dry, Su?san on?ly looked out the win?dow with an

ex?pres?sion that fright ened Cordelia bad?ly. The girl no doubt fan?cied that look

haunt?ed and des?per?ate; to Cordelia, it looked on?ly child?ish?ly will?ful.

“All right, Su?san,” she said in a calm, mod?ulat?ed voice. The girl would nev?er

know what a strain it was to achieve that tone, let alone main?tain it. Un?less she

was faced with a will?ful teenag?er of her own one day, that was. “What’s fashed thee so?”

Su?san turned to her—Cordelia Del?ga?do, just sit?ting there in her rock?er, calm as a

stone. In that mo?ment Su?san felt she could fly at her aunt and claw her thin, self-

righteous face to strings, scream?ing This is your fault! Yours! All yours! She felt

soiled—no, that wasn’t strong enough; she felt filthy, and noth?ing had re?al?ly

hap?pened. In a way, that was the hor?ror of it. Noth?ing had re?al?ly hap?pened yet.

“It shows?” was all she said.

“Of course it does,” Cordelia replied. “Now tell me, girl. Has he been on thee?”

“Yes ... no ... no.”

Aunt Cord sat in her chair, knit?ting in her lap, eye?brows raised, wait ing for more.

At last Su?san told her what had hap?pened, speak?ing in a tone that was most?ly

flat—a lit?tle trem?ble in?trud?ed to?ward the end, but that was all. Aunt Cord be?gan to

feel a cau?tious sort of re?lief. Per?haps more goose-?girl nerves was all it came down

to, af?ter all!

The sub?sti?tute gown, like all the sub?sti?tutes, hadn’t been fin?ished off; there was too

much else to do. Maria had there?fore turned Su?san over to blade-?faced Conchet?ta

Mor?gen?stem, the chief seam?stress, who had led Su?san in?to the down?stairs sewing

room without saying anything—if saved words were gold, Su?san had some?times

re?lected, Conchet?ta would be as rich as the May?or's sis?ter was re?put?ed to be.

Blue Dress With Beads was draped over a head?less dress?mak?er's dum?my crouched

be?neath one low eave, and al?though Su?san could see ragged places on the hem and

one small hole around to the back, it was by no means the tat?tered ru?in she had

been ex?pect?ing.

"Can it not be saved?" she asked, rather timid?ly.

"No," Conchet?ta said curt?ly. "Get out of those trousers, girl. Shirt, too."

Su?san did as she was bid, stand?ing bare?foot in the cool lit?tle room with her arms

crossed over her bo?som .. . not that Conchet?ta had ev?er shown the slight?est in?ter?est

in what she had, back or front, above or be?low.

Blue Dress With Beads was to be re?placed by Pink Dress With Ap plique, it

seemed. Su?san stepped in?to it, raised the straps, and stood pa tient?ly while

Conchet?ta bent and mea?sured and mut?tered, some?times us?ing a bit of chalk to

write num?bers on a wall?-stone, some?times grab?bing a swag of ma?te?ri?al and pulling

it tighter against Su?san's hip or waist, check?ing the look in the full?-length mir?ror

on the far wall. As al?ways dur ing this pro?cess, Su?san slipped away men?tal?ly,

al?low?ing her mind to go where it want?ed. Where it want?ed to go most fre?quent?ly

these days was in?to a day?dream of rid?ing along the Drop with Roland, the two of

them side by side, fi?nal?ly stop?ping in a wil?low grove she knew that over?looked

Ham?bry Creek.

"Stand there still as you can," Conchet?ta said curt?ly. "I be back."

Su?san was hard?ly aware she was gone; was hard?ly aware she was in May?or's

House at all. The part of her that re?al?ly mat?tered wasn't there. That part was in the

wil?low grove with Roland. She could smell the faint half?

sweet, half-?acrid

per?fume of the trees and hear the qui?et gos?sip of the stream
as they lay down

to?geth?er fore?head to fore?head. He traced the shape of her
face with the palm of his

hand be?fore tak?ing her in his arms . . .

This day?dream was so strong that at first Su?san re?spond?ed
to the arms which

curled around her waist from be?hind, arch?ing her back as they
first ca?ressed her

stom?ach and then rose to cup her breasts. Then she heard a
kind of plow?ing,

snort?ing breath in her ear, smelled to?bac?co, and un?der stood
what was hap?pen?ing.

Not Roland touch?ing her breasts, but Hart Thorin's long and
skin?ny fin?gers. She

looked in the mir?ror and saw him loom?ing over her left shoul?
der like an in?cubus.

His eyes were bulging, there were big drops of sweat on his
fore?head in spite of

the room's cool ness, and his tongue was ac?tu?al?ly hang?ing
out, like a dog's on a

hot day. Re?vul?sion rose in her throat like the taste of rot?ten
food. She tried to pull

away and his hands tight?ened their hold, pulling her against
him. His knuck?les

cracked ob?scene?ly, and now she could feel the hard lump at
the cen?ter of him.

At times over the last few weeks, Su?san had al?lowed her?self
to hope that, when the

time came, Thorin would be in?ca?pable—that he would be able
to make no iron at

the forge. She had heard this of?ten hap?pened to men when
they got old?er. The

hard, throbb?ing col?umn which lay against her bot?tom dis?
abused her of that wist?ful

no?tion in a hur?ry.

She had man?aged at least a de?gree of diplo?ma?cy by sim?ply
putting her hands over

his and at?tempt?ing to draw them off her breasts in?stead of
pulling away from him

again (Cordelia, im?pas?sive, not show?ing the great re?lief she
felt at this).

“May?or Thorin—Hart—you mustn't—this is hard?ly the place
and not yet the

time—Rhea said—”

“Balls to her and all witch?es!” His cul?tured politi?cian’s tones had been re?placed by

an ac?cent as thick as that in the voice of any back-?coun?try farm?hand from On?nie’s

Ford. “I must have some?thing, a bon?bon, aye, so I must. Balls to the witch, I say!

Owl?shit to ?er!” The smell of to?bac?co a thick reek around her head. She thought

that she would vom?it if she had to smell it much longer. “Just stand still, girl.

Stand still, my temp?ta?tion. Mind me well!”

Some?how she did. There was even some dis?tant part of her mind, a part to?tal?ly

ded?icat?ed to self-?preser?va?tion, that hoped he would mis?take her shud?ders of

re?vul?sion for maid?en?ly ex?cite?ment. He had drawn her tight against him, hands

work?ing en?er?get?ical?ly on her breasts, his res?pi?ra tion a stinky steam-?en?gine in her

ear. She stood back to him, her eyes closed, tears squeez?ing out from be?neath the

lids and through the fringes of her lash?es.

It didn’t take him long. He rocked back and forth against her, moan ing like a man

with stom?ach cramps. At one point he licked the lobe of her ear, and Su?sana

thought her skin would crawl right off her body in its re?vul?sion. Fi?nal?ly,

thank?ful?ly, she felt him be?gin to spasm against her.

“Oh, aye, get out, ye damned poi?son!” he said in a voice that was al?most a squeal.

He pushed so hard she had to brace her hands against the wall to keep from be?ing

driv?en face-?first in?to it. Then he at last stepped back.

For a mo?ment Su?sana on?ly stood as she was, with her palms against the rough cold

stone of the sewing room wall. She could see Thorin in the mir?ror, and in his

im?age she saw the or?di?nary doom that was rush?ing at her, the or?di?nary doom of

which this was but a fore?taste: the end of girl hood, the end of ro?mance, the end of

dreams where she and Roland lay to geth?er in the wil?low grove with their

fore?heads touch?ing. The man in the mir?ror looked odd?ly like a boy him?self, one

who's been up to some?thing he wouldn't tell his moth?er about. Just a tall and

gan?gly lad with strange gray hair and nar?row twitch?ing shoul?ders and a wet spot

on the front of his trousers. Hart Thorin looked as if he didn't quite know where he

was. In that mo?ment the lust was flushed out of his face, but what re?placed it was

no bet?ter—that va?cant con?fu?sion. It was as if he were a buck?et with a hole in the

bot?tom: no mat?ter what you put in it, or how much, it al?ways ran out be?fore long.

He 'II do it again, she thought, and felt an im?mense tired?ness creep over her. Now

that he's done it once, he 'II do it ev?ery chance he gets, like?ly. From now on

com?ing up here is go?ing to be like . . . well . . .

Like Cas?tles. Like play?ing at Cas?tles.

Thorin looked at her a mo?ment longer. Slow?ly, like a man in a dream, he pulled

the tail of his bil?lowy white shirt out of his pants and let it drop around him like a

skirt, cov?er?ing the wet spot. His chin gleamed; he had drooled in his ex?cite?ment.

He seemed to feel this and wiped the wet?ness away with the heel of one hand,

look?ing at her with those emp?ty eyes all the while. Then some ex?pres?sion at last

came in?to them, and with?out an oth?er word he turned and left the room.

There was a lit?tle scuf?fling thud in the hall as he col?lid?ed with some?one out there.

Su?san heard him mut?ter "Sor?ry! Sor?ry!" un?der his breath (it was more apol?ogy

than he'd giv?en her, mut?tered or not), and then Conchet?ta stepped back in?to the

room. The swatch of cloth she'd gone af?ter was draped around her shoul?ders like

a stole. She took in Su?san's pale face and tearstained cheeks at once. She'll say

noth?ing, Su?san thought. None of them will, just as none of them will lift a fin?ger to

help me off this stick I've run my?self on. "Ye sharp?ened it

your?self, gilly,” they’d

say if I called for help, and that’ll be their ex?cuse for leav?ing me to wrig?gle.

But Conchet?ta had sur?prised her. “Life’s hard, mis?sy, so it is. Best get used to it.”

5

Su?san’s voice—dry, by now pret?ty much stripped of emo?tion—at last ceased. Aunt

Cord put her knit?ting aside, got up, and put the ket?tle on for tea.

“Ye dra?ma?tize, Su?san.” She spoke in a voice that strove to be both kind and wise,

and suc?ceed?ed at nei?ther. “It’s a trait ye get from your Manch?ester side—half of

them fan?cied them?selves po?ets, t’oth?er half fan cied them?selves painters, and

al?most all of them spent their nights too drunk to tap?dance. He grabbed yer tit?ties

and gave yer a dry-?hump, that’s all. Noth?ing to be so up?set over. Cer?tain?ly noth?ing

to lose sleep over.”

“How would you know?” Su?san asked. It was dis?re?spect?ful, but she was be?yond

car?ing. She thought she’d reached a point where she could bear any?thing from her

aunt ex?cept that pa?tron?iz?ing world?ly-?wise tone of voice. It stung like a fresh

scrape.

Cordelia raised an eye?brow and spoke with?out ran?cor. “How ye do love to throw

that up to me! Aunt Cord, the dry old stick. Aunt Cord the spin?ster. Aunt Cord the

gray?ing vir?gin. Aye? Well, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty, vir?gin I might be, but I

had a lover or two back when I was young . . . be?fore the world moved on, ye

might say. May?hap one was the great Fran Lengyll.”

And may?hap not, Su?san thought; Fran Lengyll was her aunt’s se?nior by at least

fif?teen years, per?haps as many as twen?ty-?five.

“I’ve felt old Tom’s goat on my back?side a time or two, Su?san. Aye, and on my

frontside as well.”

“And were any of these lovers six?ty, with bad breath and knuck?les that cracked

when they squeezed your tit?ties, Aunt? Did any of them try to push you through

the near?est wall when old Tom be?gan to wag his beard and say baa-?baa-?baa?”

The rage she ex?pect?ed did not come. What did was worse—an ex pres?ion close to

the look of empti?ness she had seen on Thorin’s face in the mir?ror. “Deed’s done,

Su?san.” A smile, short-?lived and aw?ful, nick ered like an eye?lid on her aunt’s

nar?row face. “Deed’s done, aye.”

In a kind of ter?ror Su?san cried: “My fa?ther would have hat?ed this! Hat?ed it! And

hat?ed you for al?low?ing it to hap?pen! For en?cour?ag?ing it to hap?pen!”

“May?hap,” Aunt Cord said, and the aw?ful smile winked at her again. “May?hap so.

And the on?ly thing he’d hate more? The dis?hon?or of a broken promise, the shame

of a faith?less child. He would want thee to go on with it, Su?san. If thee would

re?mem?ber his face, thee must go on with it.”

Su?san looked at her, mouth drawn down in a trem?bling arc, eyes fill ing with tears

again. I’ve met some?one I love! That was what she would have told her if she

could. Don’t you un?der?stand how that changes things? I’ve met some?one I love!

But if Aunt Cord had been the sort of per?son to whom she could have said such a

thing, Su?san would like?ly nev?er have been im?paled on this stick to be?gin with. So

she turned and stum?bled from the house with?out say?ing any?thing, her stream?ing

eyes blur?ring her vi?sion and fill?ing the late sum?mer world with rue?ful col?or.

6

She rode with no con?scious idea of where she was go?ing, yet some part of her

must have had a very spe?cif?ic des?ti?na?tion in mind, be?cause forty min utes af?ter

leav?ing her house, she found her?self ap?proach?ing the very grove of wil?lows she

had been day?dream?ing about when Thorin had crept up be hind her like some bad

elf out of a gam?mer's sto?ry.

It was bless?ed?ly cool in the wil?lows. Su?san tied Fe?li?cia (whom she had rid?den out

bare?back) to a branch, then walked slow?ly across the lit?tle clear?ing which lay at

the heart of the grove. Here the stream passed, and here she sat on the springy

moss which car?pet?ed the clear?ing. Of course she had come here; it was where she

had brought all her se?cret griefs and joys since she had dis?cov?ered the clear?ing at

the age of eight or nine. It was here she had come, time and time again, in the

near?ly end?less days af ter her fa?ther's death, when it had seemed to her that the

very world—her ver?sion of it, at least—had end?ed with Pat Del?ga?do. It was on?ly

this clear ing that had heard the full and painful mea?sure of her grief; to the stream

she had spo?ken it, and the stream had car?ried it away.

Now a fresh spate of tears took her. She put her head on her knees and

sobbed—loud, un?la?dy?like sounds like the caw of squab?bling crows. In that

mo?ment she thought she would have giv?en any?thing—ev?ery?thing— to have her

fa?ther back for one minute, to ask him if she must go on with this.

She wept above the brook, and when she heard the sound of a snap ping branch,

she start?ed and looked back over her shoul?der in ter?ror and cha?grin. This was her

se?cret place and she didn't want to be found here, es?pe?cial?ly not when she was

bawl?ing like a kid?die who has fall?en and bumped her head. An?oth?er branch

snapped. Some?one was here, all right, in?vad?ing her se?cret place at the worst

pos?si?ble time.

“Go away!” she screamed in a tear-?clot?ted voice she bare?ly recog nized. “Go

away, who?ev?er ye are, be de?cent and leave me alone!”

But the fig?ure—she could now see it—kept com?ing. When she saw who it was,

she at first thought that Will Dear?born (Roland, she thought,

his real name is

Roland) must be a figment of her overstrained imagination. She wasn't entirely

sure he was real until he knelt and put his arms around her. Then she hugged him

with panicky tightness. "How did you know I was—"

"Saw you riding across the Drop. I was at a place where I go to think sometimes,

and I saw you. I wouldn't have followed, except I saw that you were riding

back. I thought something might be wrong."

"Everything's wrong."

Deliberately, with his eyes wide open and serious, he began kissing her cheeks. He

had done it several times on both sides of her face before she realized he was

kissing her tears away. Then he took her by the shoulders and held her back from

him so he could look into her eyes.

"Say it again and I will, Susan. I don't know if that's a promise or a warning or

both at the same time, but... say it again and I will."

There was no need to ask him what he meant. She seemed to feel the ground move

beneath her, and later she would think that for the first and only time in her life

she had actually felt ka, a wind that came not from the sky but from the earth. It

has come to me, after all, she thought. My ka, for good or ill.

"Roland!"

"Yes, Susan."

She dropped her hand below his belt-buckle and grasped what was there, her eyes

never leaving his.

"If you love me, then love me."

"Aye, lady. I will."

He unbuttoned his shirt, made in a part of Mid-World she would never see, and

took her in his arms.

7

Ka:

They helped each other with their clothes; they lay naked in each other's arms on

summer moss as soft as the finest goose-down. They lay with their foreheads

touch?ing, as in her day?dream, and when he found his way in?
to her, she felt pain

melt in?to sweet?ness like some wild and ex?otic herb that may
on?ly be tast?ed once in

each life?time. She held that taste as long as she could, un?til at
last the sweet?ness

over?came it and she gave in to that, moan?ing deep in her
throat and rub?bing her

fore?arms against the sides of his neck. They made love in the
wil?low grove,

ques?tions of hon?or put aside, promis?es bro?ken with?out so
much as a look back,

and at the end of it Su?s?san dis?cov?ered there was more than
sweet?ness; there was a

kind of deliri?ous clinch?ing of the nerves that be?gan in the
part of her that had

opened be?fore him like a flow?er; it be?gan there and then
filled her en?tire body. She

cried out again and again, think?ing there could not be so much
plea?sure in the

mor?tal world; she would die of it. Roland added his voice to
hers, and the sound of

wa?ter rush?ing over stones wrapped around both. As she pulled
him clos?er to her,

lock?ing her an?kles to?geth?er be?hind his knees and cov?er?
ing his face with fierce

kiss?es, his go?ing out rushed af?ter hers as if try?ing to catch
up. So were lovers

joined in the Barony of Mejis, near the end of the last great age,
and the green

moss be?neath the place where her thighs joined turned a pret?
ty red as her vir?gin?ity

passed; so were they joined and so were they doomed.

Ka.

8

They lay to?geth?er in each oth?er's arms, shar?ing af?ter?glow
kiss?es be?neath Fe?li?cia's

mild gaze, and Roland felt him?self drows?ing. This was un?der
stand?able—the

strain on him that sum?mer had been enor?mous, and he had
been sleep?ing bad?ly.

Al?though he didn't know it then, he would sleep bad?ly for the
rest of his life.

"Roland?" Her voice, dis?tant. Sweet, as well.

"Yes?"

"Will thee take care of me?"

"Yes."

"I can't go to him when the time comes. I can bear his touch?ing, and his lit?tle

thefts—if I have you, I can—but I can't go to him on Reap Night. I don't know if

I've for?got?ten the face of my fa?ther or not, but I can?not go lo Hart Thorin's bed.

There are ways the loss of a girl's vir?gin?ity can be con?cealed, I think, but I won't

use them. I sim?ply can?not go to his bed."

"All right," he said, "good." And then, as her eyes widened in startle?ment, he

looked around. No one was there. He looked back at Su?san, ful?ly awake now.

"What? What is it?"

"I might al?ready be car?ry?ing your child," she said. "Has thee thought of that?"

He hadn't. Now he did. A child. An?oth?er link in the chain stretch?ing hack in?to the

dim?ness where Arthur Eld had led his gun?slingers in?to bat?tle with the great sword

Ex?cal?ibur raised above his head and the crown of All-?World on his brow. But

nev?er mind that; what would his fa?ther think? Ur Gabrielle, to know she had

be?come a grand?moth?er?

A lit?tle smile had formed at the com?ers of his mouth, but the thought of his moth?er

drove it away. He thought of the mark on her neck. When his moth?er came to his

mind these days, he al?ways thought of the mark he'd seen on her neck when he

came un?ex?pect?ed in?to her apart?ment. And the small, rue?ful smile on her face.

"If you car?ry my child, such is my good for?tune," he said.

"And mine." It was her turn to smile, but it had a sad look to it all the same, that

smile. "We're too young, I sup?pose. Lit?tle more than kid?dies our?selves."

He rolled on?to his back and looked up at the blue sky. What she said might be

true, but it didn't mat?ter. Truth was some?times not the same as re?al?ity—this was

one of the cer?tain?ties that lived in the hol?low, cavey place at

the cen?ter of his

di?vid?ed na?ture. That he could rise above both and will?ing?ly
em?brace the in?san?ity

of ro?mance was a gift from his moth?er. All else in his na?ture
was hu?mor?less . . .

and, per?haps more im?por?tant, with?out metaphor. That they
were too young to be

par?ents? What of that? If he had plant?ed a seed, it would
grow.

"What?ev?er comes, we'll do as we must. And I'll al?ways love
you, no mat?ter what

comes."

She smiled. He said it as a man would state any dry fact: sky is
up, earth is down,

wa?ter flows south.

"Roland, how old are you?" She was some?times trou?bled by
the idea that, young

as she her?self was, Roland was even younger. When he was
con?cen?trat?ing on

some?thing, he could look so hard he fright?ened her. When he
smiled, he looked

not like a lover but a kid broth?er.

"Old?er than I was when I came here," he said. "Old?er by far.
And if I have to stay

in sight of Jonas and his men an?oth?er six months, I'll be hob
bling and need?ing a

boost in the ar?se to get aboard my horse."

She grinned at that, and he kissed her nose.

"And thee'll take care of me?"

"Aye," he said, and grinned back at her. Su?san nod?ded, then
al?so turned on her

back. They lay that way, hip to hip, look?ing up at the sky. She
took his hand and

placed it on her breast. As he stroked the nip?ple with his
thumb, it raised its head,

grew hard, and be?gan to tin?gle. This sen?sa?tion slipped
quick?ly down her body to

the place that was still throbbing be?tween her legs. She
squeezed her thighs

to?geth?er and was both de light?ed and dis?mayed to find that
do?ing so on?ly made

mat?ters worse.

"Ye must take care of me," she said in a low voice. "I've pinned
ev?ery?thing on you.

All else is cast aside."

"I'll do my best," he said. "Nev?er doubt it. But for now, Su?san, you must go on as

you have been. There's more time yet to pass; I know that be? cause De?pape is back

and will have told his tale, but they still haven't moved in any way against us.

What?ev?er he found out, Jonas still thinks it's in his in?ter?est to wait. That's apt to

make him more dan?ger?ous when he does move, but for now it's still Cas?tles."

"But af?ter the Reap?ing Bon?fire—Thorin—"

"You'll nev?er go to his bed. That you can count on. I set my war?rant on it."

A lit?tle shocked at her own bold?ness, she reached be?low his waist. "Here's a

war?rant ye can set on me, if ye would," she said.

He would. Could. And did.

When it was over (for Roland it had been even sweet?er than the first time, if that

was pos?si?ble), he asked her: "That feel?ing you had out at Cit? go, Su?san—of be?ing

watched. Did you have it this time?"

She looked at him long and thought?ful?ly. "I don't know. My mind was in oth?er

places, ye ken." She touched him gen?tly, then laughed as he jumped—the nerves

in the half-?hard, half-?soft place where her palm stroked were still very live?ly, it

seemed.

She took her hand away and looked up at the cir?cle of sky above the grove. "So

beau?ti?ful here," she mur?mured, and her eyes drift?ed closed.

Roland al?so felt him?self drift?ing. It was iron?ic, he thought. This time she hadn't

had that sen?sa?tion of be?ing watched ... but the sec?ond time, he had. Yet he would

have sworn there was no one near this grove.

No mat?ter. The feel?ing, megrim or re?al?ity, was gone now. He took Su?san's hand,

and felt her fin?gers slip nat?ural?ly through his, en?twin?ing.

He closed his eyes.

9

All of this Rhea saw in the glass, and wery in?ter?est?ing view? ing it made, aye, wery

in?ter?est?ing, in?deed. But she'd seen shag?ging be?fore—

some?times with three or four

or even more do?ing it all at the same time (some?times with part ners who were not

pre?cise?ly alive)—and the hokey-?pokey wasn't very in?ter es?ting to her at her

ad?vanced age. What she was in?ter?est?ed in was what would come af?ter the hokey-

pokey.

Is our busi?ness done? the girl had asked.

May?hap there's one more lit?tle thing, Rhea had re?spond?ed, and then she told the

im?pu?dent trull what to do.

Aye, she'd giv?en the girl very clear in?struc?tions as the two of them stood in the hut

door?way, the Kiss?ing Moon shin?ing down on them as Su?sana Del?ga?do slept the

strange sleep and Rhea stroked her braid and whis?pered in?struc?tions in her ear.

Now would come the ful?fill?ment of that in?ter?lude . . . and that was what she

want?ed to see, not two bab?bies shag?ging each oth?er like they were the first two on

earth to dis?cov?er how 'twas done.

Twice they did it with hard?ly a pause to nat?ter in be?tween (she would have giv?en a

good deal to hear that nat?ter, too). Rhea wasn't sur?prised; at his young age, she

sup?posed the brat had enough spunkum in his sack to give her a week's worth of

dou?bles, and from the way the lit?tle slut act?ed, that might be to her taste. Some of

them dis?cov?ered it and nev?er want?ed aught else; this was one, Rhea thought.

But let's see how sexy you feel in a few min?utes, you snip?py bitch, she thought, and

leaned deep?er in?to the puls?ing pink light thrown from the glass. She could

some?times feel that light aching in the very bones of her face . . . but it was a good

ache. Aye, wery good in?deed.

They were at last done ... for the time be?ing, at least. They clasped hands and

drift?ed off to sleep.

"Now," Rhea mur?mured. "Now, my lit?tle one. Be a good girl and do as ye were

told."

As if hearing her, Susan's eyes opened—but there was nothing in them. They

woke and slept at the same time. Rhea saw her gently pull her hand free of the

boy's. She sat up, bare breasts against bare thighs, and looked around. She got to

her feet—

That was when Musty, the six-legged cat, jumped in to Rhea's lap, yawning for

either food or affection. The old woman shrieked with surprise, and the wizard's

glass at once went dark—puffed out like a candle-flame in a gust of wind.

Rhea shrieked again, this time with rage, and seized the cat before it could flee.

She hurled it across the room, in to the fireplace. That was as dead a hole as only a

summer fireplace can be, but when Rhea cast a bony, misshapen hand at it, a

yellow gust of flame rose from the single half-charred log lying in there. Musty

screamed and fled from the hearth with his eyes wide and his split tail smoking

like an indifferent butted cigar.

"Run, aye!" Rhea spat after him. "Be gone, ye vile cusk!"

She turned back to the glass and spread her hands over it, thumb to thumb. But

although she concentrated with all her might, willed until her heart was beating

with a sick fury in her chest, she could do no more than bring back the ball's

natural pink glow. No images appeared. This was bitterly disappointing, but there

was nothing to be done. And in time she would be able to see the results with her

own two natural eyes, if she cared to go to town and do so.

Everybody would be able to see.

Her good humor restored, Rhea returned the ball to its hiding place.

10

Only moments before he would have sunk too deep in sleep to have heard it, a

warning bell went off in Roland's mind. Perhaps it was the faint realization that

her hand was no longer entwined with his; perhaps it was raw in?tuition. He could

have ignored that faint bell, and almost did, but in the end his train?ing was too

strong. He came up from the thresh?old of re?al sleep, fight?ing his way back to

clar?ity as a div?er kicks for the sur?face of a quar?ry. It was hard at first, but be?came

eas?ier; as he neared wake?ful?ness, his alarm grew.

He opened his eyes and looked to his left. Su?san was no longer there. He sat up,

looked to his right, and saw noth?ing above the cut of the stream ... yet he felt that

she was in that di?rec?tion, all the same.

“Su?san?”

No re?sponse. He got up, looked at his pants, and Cort—a vis?itor he nev?er would

have ex?pect?ed in such a ro?man?tic bow?er as this—spoke up gruffly in his mind. No

time, mag?got.

He walked naked to the bank and looked down. Su?san was there, all right, al?so

naked, her back to him. She had un?braid?ed her hair. It hung, loose gold, al?most all

the way to the lyre oth?er hips. The chill air ris?ing from the sur?face of the stream

shiv?ered the tips of it like mist.

She was down on one knee at the edge of the run?ning wa?ter. One arm was plunged

in?to it al?most to the el?bow; she searched for some?thing, it seemed.

“Su?san!”

No an?swer. And now a cold thought came to him: She’s been in?fest?ed by a de?mon.

While I slept, heed?less, be?side her, she’s been in?fest?ed by a de?mon. Yet he did not

think he re?al?ly be?lieved that. If there had been a de mon near this clear?ing, he

would have felt it. Like?ly both of them would have felt it; the hors?es, too. But

some?thing was wrong with her.

She brought an ob?ject up from the streambed and held it be?fore her eyes in her

drip?ping hand. A stone. She ex?am?ined it, then tossed it back — plunk. She reached

in again, head bent, two sheafs of her hair now ac?tu al?ly float?ing on the wa?ter, the stream prank?ish?ly tug?ging them in the di?rec?tion it flowed. “Su?san!”

No re?sponse. She plucked an?oth?er stone out of the stream. This one was a

tri?an?gu?lar white quartz, shat?tered in?to a shape that was al?most like the head of a

spear. Su?san tilt?ed her head to the left and took a sheaf of her hair in her hand, like

a wom?an who means to comb out a nest of tan?gles. But there was no comb, on?ly

the rock with its sharp edge, and for a mo ment longer Roland re?mained on the

bank, frozen with hor?ror, sure that she meant to cut her own throat out of shame

and guilt over what they’d done. In the weeks to come, he was haunt?ed by a clear

knowl?edge: if it had been her throat she’d in?tend?ed, he wouldn’t have been in time

to stop her.

Then the paral?ysis broke and he hurled him?self down the bank, un mind?ful of the

sharp stones that gouged the soles of his feet. Be?fore he reached her, she had

al?ready used the edge of the quartz to cut off part of the gold?en tress she held.

Roland seized her wrist and pulled it back. He could see her face clear?ly now.

What could have been mis?tak?en for seren?ity from the top of the bank now looked

like what it re?al?ly was: vacu?ity, empti?ness.

When he took hold of her, the smooth?ness of her face was re?placed by a dim and

fret?ful smile; her mouth quiv?ered as if she felt dis?tant pain, and an al?most form?less

sound of nega?tion came from her mouth:

“Nnnnnnnnn—”

Some of the hair she had cut off lay on her thigh like gold wire; most had fall?en

in?to the stream and been car?ried away. Su?san pulled against Roland’s hand, try?ing

to get the sharp edge back to her hair, want?ing to con tin?ue her mad bar?ber?ing. The

two of them strove to?geth?er like arm?-wrestlers in a bar?room

con?test. And Su?san

was win?ning. He was phys?ical?ly the stronger, but not stronger than the

en?chant?ment which held her. Lit?tle by lit tle the white tri?an?gle of quartz moved

back to?ward her hang?ing hair. That fright?en?ing sound—Nnnnnnnnnn—kept

drift?ing from her mouth.

“Su?san! Stop it! Wake up!”

“Nnnnnnnnn— ”

Her bare arm quiv?er?ing vis?ibly in the air, the mus?cles bunched like hard lit?tle

rocks. And the quartz mov?ing clos?er and clos?er to her hair, her cheek, the sock?et of her eye.

With?out think?ing about it—it was the way he al?ways act?ed most

suc cess?ful?ly—Roland moved his face close to the side oth?ers, giv?ing up an oth?er

four inch?es to the fist hold?ing the stone in or?der to do it. He put his lips against the

cup of her ear and then clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Clucked

side?mouth, in fact.

Su?san jerked back from that sound, which must have gone through her head like a

spear. Her eye?lids flut?tered rapid?ly, and the pres?sure she was ex?ert?ing against

Roland’s grip eased a lit?tle. He took the chance and twist?ed her wrist.

“Ow!Owwww!”

The stone flew out of her open?ing hand and splashed in?to the wa?ter. Su?san gazed

at him, now ful?ly awake, her eyes filled with tears and be?wil der?ment. She was

rub?bing her wrist. . . which, Roland thought, was like?ly to swell.

“Ye hurt me, Roland! Why did ye hurt m ...”

She trailed off, look?ing around. Now not just her face but the whole set oth?er body

ex?pressed be?wil?der?ment. She moved to cov?er her?self with her hands, then re?al?ized

they were still alone and dropped them to her sides. She glanced over her shoul?der

at the foot?prints—all of them bare— lead?ing down the bank.

“How did I get down here?” she asked. “Did thee car?ry me, after I fell asleep? And

why did thee hurt me? Oh, Roland, I love thee—why did ye hurt me?”

He picked up the strands of hair that still lay on her thigh and held them in front of

her. “You had a stone with a sharp edge. You were try?ing to cut your?self with it,

and you didn’t want to stop. I hurt you be?cause I was scared. I’m just glad I didn’t

break your wrist ... at least, I don’t think I did.”

Roland took it and ro?tat?ed it gen?tly in ei?ther di?rec?tion, lis?ten?ing for the grate of small bones.

He heard noth?ing, and the wrist turned freely. As Su?san watched, stunned and

con?fused, he raised it to his lips and kissed the in?ner part, above the del?icate trac?ery of veins.

11

Roland had tied Rush?er just far enough in?to the wil?lows so the big geld ing could

not be seen by any?one who hap?ened to come rid?ing along the Drop.

“Be easy,” Roland said, ap?proach?ing. “Be easy a lit?tle longer, good-?heart.”

Rush?er stamped and whick?ered, as if to say he could be easy un?til the end of the

age, if that was what were re?quired.

Roland nipped open his sad?dle?bag and took out the steel uten?sil that served as

ei?ther a pot or a fry?pan, de?pend?ing on his needs. He start?ed away, then turned

back. His bedroll was tied be?hind Push?er’s sad?dle he had planned to spend the

night camped out on the Drop, think?ing. There had been a lot to think about, and

now there was even more.

He pulled one of the rawhide ties, reached in?side the blan?kets, and pulled out a

small met?al box. This he opened with a tiny key he drew from around his neck.

In?side the box was a small square lock?et on a fine sil?ver chain (in?side the lock?et

was a line-?draw?ing of his moth?er), and a hand?ful of ex?tra

shells—not quite a

dozen. He took one, closed it in his fist, and went back to Susan. She looked at

him with wide, frightened eyes.

“I don’t remember anything after we made love the second time,” she said. “Only

looking up at the sky and thinking how good I felt and going to sleep. Oh, Roland,

how bad does it look?”

“Not bad, I should think, but you’ll know better than I. Here.”

He dipped his cooker full of water and set it on the bank. Susan bent over it

apprehensively, laying the hair on the left side of her head across her forearm, then

moving the arm slowly outward, extending the tress in a band of bright gold. She

saw the ragged cut at once. She examined it carefully, then let it drop with a sigh

more relieved than rueful.

“I can hide it,” she said. “When it’s braided, no one will know. And after all, ’tis

only hair—no more than woman’s vanity. My aunt has told me so often enough,

certainly. But Roland, why? Why did I do it?”

Roland had an idea. If hair was a woman’s vanity, then hair-chopping would likely

be a woman’s bit of nastiness—a man would hardly think of it at all. The Mayor’s

wife, had it been her? He thought not. It seemed more likely that Rhea, up there on

her height of land looking north toward the Bad Grass, Hanging Rock, and

Eyebolt Canyon, had set this ugly trap. Mayor Thorin had been meant to wake up

on the morning after the Reap with a hangover and a bald-headed gilly.

“Susan, can I try something?”

She gave him a smile. “Something ye didn’t try already upon? Aye, what ye

will.”

“Nothing like that.” He opened the hand he had held closed, showing the shell. “I

want to try and find out who did this to you, and why.” And other things, too. He

just didn’t know what they were yet.

She looked at the shell. Roland began to move it along the back of his hand,

dancing it back and forth in a dexterous weaving. His knuckles rose and fell like

the heddles of a loom. She watched this with a child's fascination. "Where

did ye learn that?"

"At home. It doesn't matter."

"Ye'd hypnotize me?"

"Aye ... and I don't think it would be for the first time." He made the shell dance a

bit faster—now east along his rippling knuckles, now west. "May I?"

"Aye," she said. "If you can."

12

He could, all right; the speed with which she went under confirmed that this had

happened to Susan before, and recently. Yet he couldn't get what he wanted from

her. She was perfectly cooperative (some sleep eather, fort would have said), but

beyond a certain point she would not go. It wasn't decorum or modesty, either—as

she slept open-eyed before the stream, she told him in a far-off but calm voice

about the old woman's examination, and the way Rhea had tried to "fiddle her up."

(At this Poland's fists clenched so tightly his nails bit into his palms.) But there

came a point where she could no longer remember.

She and Rhea had gone to the door of the hut, Susan said, and there they had stood

with the Kissing Moon shining down on their faces. The old woman had been

touching her hair, Susan remembered that much. The touch revolted her,

especially after the witch's previous touches, but Susan had been unable to do

anything about it. Arms too heavy to raise; tongue too heavy to speak. She could

only stand there while the witch whispered in her ear.

"What?" Roland asked. "What did she whisper?"

"I don't know," Susan said. "The rest is pink."

"Pink? What do you mean?"

"Pink," she repeated. She sounded almost amused, as if she

believed Roland was

being deliberately dense. "She says, 'Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are,'

then everything's pink. Pink and bright."

"Bright."

"Aye, like the moon. And then . . ." She paused. "Then I think it becomes the

moon. The Kissing Moon, maybe. A bright pink Kissing Moon, as round and full

as a grapefruit."

He tried other ways into her memory with no success—every path he tried ended

in that bright pinkness, first obscuring her recollection and then coalescing into a

full moon. It meant nothing to Roland; he'd heard of blue moons, but never pink

ones. The only thing of which he was sure was that the old woman had given

Susan a powerful command to forget.

He considered taking her deeper—she would go—but didn't dare. Most of his

experience came from hypnotizing his friends—classroom exercises that were

larky and occasionally spooky. Always there had been Cort or Vanay present to

make things right if they went off-track. Now there were no teachers to step in; for

better or worse, the students had been left in charge of the school. What if he took

her deep and couldn't get her back up again? And he had been told there were

demons in the below-mind as well. If you went down to where they were, they

some times swam out of their caves to meet you . . .

All other considerations aside, it was getting late. It wouldn't be prudent to stay

here much longer.

"Susan, do you hear me?"

"Aye, Roland, I hear you very well."

"Good. I'm going to say a rhyme. You'll wake up as I say it. When I'm done, you'll

be wide awake and remember everything we've said. Do you understand?"

"Aye."

"Listen: Bird and bear and hare and fish, Give my love her fond

est wish."

Her smile as she rose to consciousness was one of the most beautiful things he had

ever seen. She stretched, then put her arms around his neck and covered his face

with kisses. "You, you, you, you," she said. "You're my fondest wish, Roland.

You're my only wish. You and you, forever and ever."

They made love again there on the bank, beside the babbling stream, holding each

other as tightly as they could, breathing into each other's mouths and living on

each other's breath. You, you, you, you.

13

Twenty minutes later, he boosted her onto Felicia's back. Susan leaned down, took

his face in her hands, and kissed him soundly.

"When will I see ye again?" she asked.

"Soon. But we must be careful."

"Aye. Careful as two lovers ever were, I think. Thank God thee's clever."

"We can use Sheemie, if we don't use him too often."

"Aye. And, Roland—do ye know the pavilion in Green Heart? Close to where

they serve tea and cakes and things when the weather's fair?"

Roland did. Fifty yards or so up Hill Street from the jail and the Town Gatherings

Hall, Green Heart was one of the most pleasant places in town, with its quaint

paths, umbrellas, shadeds, grassy dancing pavilion, and menagerie.

"There's a rock wall at the back," she said. "Between the pavilion and the

menagerie. If you need me badly—"

"I'll always need you badly," he said.

She smiled at his gravity. "There's a stone on one of the lower courses—a red dish

one. You'll see it. My friend Amy and I used to leave messages there for each

other when we were little girls. I'll look there when I can. Ye do the same."

"Aye." Sheemie would work for awhile, if they were careful. The red rock might

also work for awhile, if they were careful. But no matter how careful they were,

they would slip even?tu?al?ly, be?cause the Big Cof?fin Hunters now prob?ably knew

more about Roland and his friends than Roland ev?er would have wished. But he

had to see her, no mat?ter what the risks. If he didn't, he felt he might die. And he

on?ly had to look at her to know she felt the same.

"Watch spe?cial for Jonas and the oth?er two," he said.

"I will. An?oth?er kiss, if ye fa?vor?"

He kissed her glad?ly, and would just as glad?ly have pulled her off the mare's back

for a fourth go-round . . . but it was time to stop be?ing delirious and start be?ing

care?ful.

"Fare you well, Su?san. I love y—" He paused, then smiled. "I love thee."

"And I thee, Roland. What heart I have is yours."

She had a great heart, he thought as she slipped through the wil?lows, and al?ready

he felt its bur?den on his own. He wait?ed un?til he felt sure she must be well away.

Then he went to Rush?er and rode off in the op?po?site di?rec?tion, know?ing that a new

and dan?ger?ous phase of the game had be?gun.

14

Not too long af?ter Su?san and Roland had part?ed, Cordelia Del?ga?do stepped out of

the Ham?bry Mer?can?tile with a box of gro?ceries and a trou?bled mind. The trou?bled

mind was caused by Su?san, of course, al?ways Su?san, and Cordelia's fear that the

girl would do some?thing stupid be?fore Reap?ing fi?nal?ly came around.

These thoughts were snatched out of her mind just as hands—strong

ones—snatched the box of gro?ceries from her arms. Cordelia cawed in sur?prise,

shad?ed her eyes against the sun, and saw El?dred Jonas stand?ing there be?tween the

Bear and Tur?tle totems, smil?ing at her. His hair, long and white (and beau?ti?ful, in

her opin?ion), lay over his shoul?ders. Cordelia felt her heart beat a lit?tle faster. She

had al?ways been par?tial to men like Jonas, who could smile and ban?ter their way

to the edge of risquéness . . . but who carried their bodies like blades.

"I startled you. I cry your pardon, Cordelia."

"Nay," she said, sounding a little breathless to her own ears. "It's just the sun—so bright at this time of day—"

"I'd help you a bit on your way, if you give me leave. I'm only going up High as

far as the corner, then I turn up the Hill, but may I help you that far?"

"With thanks," she said. They walked down the steps and up the board sidewalk,

Cordelia looking around in little pecking glances to see who was observing

them—she beside the handsome sailor Jonas, who just happened to be carrying her

goods. There was a satisfying number of onlookers. She saw Millicent Ortega, for

one, looking out of Ann's Dresses with a satisfying 0 of surprise on her stupid

cow's puss.

"I hope you don't mind me calling you Cordelia." Jonas shifted the box, which

she'd needed two hands to carry, casually under one arm. "I feel, since the

welcoming dinner at Mayor Thorin's house, that I know you."

"Cordelia's fine."

"And may I be introduced to you?"

"I think 'Mr. Jonas' will do a bit longer," she said, then favored him with what she

hoped was a coquettish smile. Her heart beat faster yet. (It did not occur to her that

perhaps Susan was not the only silly goose in the Delgado family.)

"So be it," Jonas said, with a look of disappointment so comic that she laughed.

"And your niece? Is she well?"

"Quite well, thank ye for asking. A bit of a trial, sometimes—"

"Was there ever a girl of sixteen who wasn't?"

"I suppose not."

"Yet you have advertisemental burdens regarding her this fall. I doubt if he realizes

that, though."

Cordelia said noth?ing—'twouldn't be dis?creet—but gave him a mean?ing?ful look that said much.

"Give her my best, please."

"I will." But she wouldn't. Su?san had con?ceived a great (and ir?ra tion?al, in

Cordelia's view) dis?like for May?or Thorin's reg?ula?tors. Try?ing to talk her out of

these feel?ings would like?ly do no good; young girls thought they knew ev?ery?thing.

She glanced at the star peek?ing un?ob?tru sive?ly out from be?neath the flap of Jonas's

vest. "I un?der?stand ye've tak?en on an ad?di?tion?al re?spon?si?bil?ity in our un?de?serving town, sai Jonas."

"Aye, I'm help?ing out Sher?iff Av?ery," he agreed. His voice had a reedy lit?tle

trem?ble which Cordelia found quite en?dear?ing, some?how. "One of his

deputies—Clay?pool, his name is—"

"Frank Clay?pool, aye."

"—fell out of his boat and broke his leg. How do you fall out of a boat and break

your leg, Cordelia?"

She laughed mer?ri?ly (the idea that ev?ery?one in Ham?bry was watch?ing them was

sure?ly wrong ... but it felt that way, and the feel?ing was not un pleas?ant) and said

she didn't know.

He stopped on the com?er of High and Camino Ve?ga, look?ing re?gret ful. "Here's

where I turn." He hand?ed the box back to her. "Are you sure you can car?ry that? I

sup?pose I could go on with you to your house—"

"No need, no need. Thank you. Thank you, El?dred." The blush which crept up her

neck and cheeks felt as hot as fire, but his smile was worth ev?ery de?gree of heat.

He tipped her a lit?tle salute with two fin?gers and saun?tered up the hill to?ward the

Sher?iff's of?fice.

Cordelia walked on home. The box, which had seemed such a bur?den when she

stepped out of the mer?can?tile, now seemed to weigh next to noth?ing. This feel?ing

last?ed for half a mile or so, but by the time her house came in? to view, she was

once again aware of the sweat trick?ling down her sides, and the ache in her arms.

Thank the gods sum?mer was al?most over ... and wasn't that Su?san, just lead?ing her

mare in through the gate?

"Su?san!" she called, now enough re?turned to earth for her for? mer ir?ri?ta?tion with the

girl to sound clear in her voice. "Come and help me, 'fore I drop this and break the

eggs!"

Su?san came, leav?ing Fe?li?cia to crop grass in the front yard. Ten min utes ear?li?er,

Cordelia would have no?ticed noth?ing of how the girl looked— her thoughts had

been too wrapped up in El?dred Jonas to ad?mit of much else. But the hot sun had

tak?en some of the ro?mance out of her head and re?turned her feet to earth. And as

Su?san took the box from her (han?dling it al?most as eas?ily as Jonas had done),

Cordelia thought she didn't much care for the girl's ap?pear? ance. Her tem?per had

changed, for one thing— from the half-?hys?ter?ical con?fu?sion in which she'd left to a

pleas?ant and hap?py-?eyed calm?ness. That was the Su?san of pre?vi?ous years to the

sleeve and seam . . . but not this year's moan?ing, moody breast-?beat?er. There was

noth?ing else Cordelia could put her fin?ger on, ex?cept—

But there was, ac?tu?al?ly. One thing. She reached out and grasped the girl's braid,

which looked un?char?ac?ter?is?ti?cal?ly slop?py this af?ter? noon. Of course Su?san had been

rid?ing; that could ex?plain the mess. But it didn't ex?plain how dark her hair was, as

if that bright mass of gold had be?gun to tar?nish. And she jumped, al?most guilti?ly,

when she felt Cordelia's touch. Why, pray tell, was that?

"Yer hair's damp, Su?san," she said. "Have ye been swim?ming some where?"

"Nay! I stopped and ducked my head at the pump out?side Hock?ey's barn. He

doesn't mind—'tis a deep well he has. It's so hot. Per?haps

there'll be a show'er lat'er.

I hope so. I gave Fe?li?cia to drink as well."

The girl's eyes were as di?rect and as can?did as ev?er, but Cordelia thought there was

some?thing off in them, just the same. She couldn't say what. The idea that Su?san

might be hid?ing some?thing large and se?ri?ous did not im?me?di?ately cross Cordelia's

mind; she would have said her niece was in?ca?pable of keep?ing a se?cret any greater

than a birth?day present or a sur?prise par?ty . . . and not even such se?crets as those

for more than a day or two. And yet some?thing was off here. Cordelia dropped her

fin?gers to the col?lar of the girl's rid?ing shirt.

"Yet this is dry."

"I was care?ful," she said, look?ing at her aunt with a puz?zled eye. "Dirt sticks worse

to a wet shirt. You taught me that, Aunt."

"Ye flinched when I touched yer hair, Su?san."

"Aye," Su?san said, "so I did. The weird-?wom?an touched it just that same way. I

haven't liked it since. Now may I take these gro?ceries in and get my horse out of

the hot sun?"

"Don't be pert, Su?san." Yet the edgi?ness in her niece's voice ac?tu?al?y eased her in

some strange way. That feel?ing that Su?san had changed, some?how—that feel?ing of

off?ness—be?gan to sub?side.

"Then don't be tire?some."

"Su?san! Apol?ogize to me!"

Su?san took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. "Yes, Aunt. I do. But it's hot."

"Aye. Put those in the pantry. And thankee."

Su?san went on to?ward the house with the box in her arms. When the girl had

enough of a lead so they wouldn't have to walk to?geth?er, Cordelia fol?lowed. It was

all fool?ish?ness on her part, no doubt—sus?pi?cions brought on by her flir?ta?tion with

El?dred—but the girl was at a dan?ger?ous age, and much de?pend?ed on her good

be?hav?ior over the next sev?en weeks. Af?ter that she would be Thorin's prob?lem, but

un?til then she was Cordelia's. Cordelia thought that, in the end, Su?san would be

true to her promise, but un?til Reap?ing Fair she would bear close watch?ing. About

such mat?ters as a girl's vir?gin?ity, it was best to be vig?ilant.

IN?TER?LUDE

KANSAS,

SOME?WHERE,

SOME?WHEN

Ed?die stirred. Around them the thin?ny still whined like an un?pleas?ant moth?er-?in-

law; above them the stars gleamed as bright as new hopes . . . or bad in?ten?tions.

He looked at Su?san?nah, sit?ting with the stumps of her legs curled be?neath her; he

looked at Jake, who was eat?ing a bur?ri?to; he looked at Oy, whose snout rest?ed on

Jake's an?kle and who was look?ing up at the boy with an ex?pres?sion of calm

ado?ra?tion.

The fire was low, but still it burned. The same was true of De?mon Moon, far in the

west.

"Roland." His voice sound?ed old and rusty to his own ears.

The gun?slinger, who had paused for a sip of wa?ter, looked at him with his

eye?brows raised.

"How can you know ev?ery com?er of this sto?ry?"

Roland seemed amused. "I don't think that's what you re?al?ly want to know, Ed?die."

He was right about that—old long, tall, and ug?ly made a habit of be ing right. It

was, as far as Ed?die was con?cerned, one of his most ir?ri?tat?ing char?ac?ter?is?tics. "All

right. How long have you been talk?ing? That's what I re?al?ly want to know."

"Are you un?com?fort?able? Want to go to bed?"

He's mak?ing fun of me, Ed?die thought . . . but even as the idea oc curred to him, he

knew it wasn't true. And no, he wasn't un?com?fort?able. There was no stiff?ness in

his joints, al?though he had been sit?ting cross-?legged ev?er since Roland had be?gun

by telling them about Rhea and the glass ball, and he didn't need to go to the toi?let.

Nor was he hun?gry. Jake was munch?ing the sin?gle left?over bur?ri?to, but prob?ably

for the same rea son folks climbed Mount Ever?est ... be?cause it was there. And

why should he be hun?gry or sleepy or stiff? Why, when the fire still burned and

the moon was not yet down?

He looked at Roland's amused eyes and saw the gun?slinger was read ing his

thoughts.

"No, I don't want to go to bed. You know I don't. But, Roland . . . you've been

talk?ing a long time." He paused, looked down at his hands, then looked up again,

smil?ing un?easi?ly. "Days, I would have said."

"But time is dif?fer?ent here. I've told you that; now you see for your self. Not all

nights are the same length just re?cent?ly. Days, ei?ther . . . but we no?tice time more

at night, don't we? Yes, I think we do."

"Is the thin?ny stretch?ing time?" And now that he had men?tioned it, Ed?die could

hear it in all its creepy glo?ry—a sound like vi?brat?ing met?al, or maybe the world's

biggest mosquito.

"It might be help?ing, but most?ly it's just how things are in my world."

Su?sana?h stirred like a wom?an who ris?es part?way from a dream that holds her like

sweet quick?sand. She gave Ed?die a look that was both dis tant and im?pa?tient. "Let

the man talk, Ed?die."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Let the man talk."

And Oy, with?out rais?ing his snout from Jake's an?kle: "An. Awk."

"All right," Ed?die said. "No prob?lem."

Roland swept them with his eyes. "Are you sure? The rest is . . ." He didn't seem

able to fin?ish, and Ed?die re?al?ized that Roland was scared.

"Go on," Ed?die told him qui?et?ly. "Let the rest be what it is. What it was." He

looked around. Kansas, they were in Kansas. Some?where, some?when. Ex?cept he

felt that Mejis and those peo?ple he had nev?er seen— Cordelia and Jonas and Bri?an

Hookey and Sheemie and Pet?tie the Trot?ter and Cuth?bert All?go?od—were very

close now. That Roland's lost Su?san was very close now. Be?cause re?al?ity was thin

here—as thin as the seat in an old pair of blue jeans—and the dark would hold for

as long as Roland need?ed it to hold. Ed?die doubt?ed if Roland even no?ticed the

dark, par?ticu lar?ly. Why would he? Ed?die thought it had been night in?side of

Roland's mind for a long, long time . . . and dawn was still nowhere near.

He reached out and touched one of those cal?lused killer's hands. Gen tly he

touched it, and with love.

“Go on, Roland. Tell your tale. All the way to the end.”

“All the way to the end,” Su?san?nah said dream?ily. “Cut the vein.” Her eyes were

full of moon?light.

“All the way to the end,” Jake said.

“End,” Oy whis?pered.

Roland held Ed?die's hand for a mo?ment, then let it go. He looked in?to the gut?ter?ing

fire with?out im?me?di?ate?ly speak?ing, and Ed?die sensed him try?ing to find the way.

Try?ing doors, one af?ter an?oth?er, un?til he found one that opened. What he saw

be?hind it made him smile and look up at Ed?die.

“True love is bor?ing,” he said.

“Say what?”

”True love is bor?ing,“ Roland re?peat?ed. ”As bor?ing as any oth?er strong and

ad?dict?ing drug. And, as with any oth?er strong drug . . .”

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART THREE

COME, REAP
CHAPTER 1
BENEATH THE
huntress moon

1

True love, like any other strong and addicting drug, is boring—once the tale of
encounter and discovery is told, kisses quickly grow stale
and caresses tiresome.

... except, of course, to those who share the kisses, who give
and take the caresses

while every sound and color of the world seems to deepen
and brighten around

them. As with any other strong drug, true first love is really
only in the best of

those who have become its prisoners.

And, as is true of any other strong and addicting drug, true
first love is dangerous.

2

Some called Huntress the last moon of summer; some called it
the first of fall.

Whichever it was, it signaled a change in the life of the
Barony. Men put out into

the bay wearing sweaters beneath their oilskins as the winds
began to turn more

and more firmly into autumn's east-west alley, and to
sharpen as they turned. In

the great Barony orchards north of Hamby (and in smaller
orchards owned by

John Croydon, Henry Wertner, Jake White, and the more
but wealthy Coral

Thorin), the pickers began to appear in the rows, carrying
their odd, off-kilter

ladders; they were followed by horse-drawn carts full of empty
barrels.

Downwind of the cider-houses—especially downwind of
the great Barony cider-

man'sion a mile north of Seafront—the breezy air was filled
with the sweet tang of

blems being pressed by the basketload. Away from the shore
of the Clean Sea, the

days remained warm as the Huntress waxed, skies were clear

day and night, but

summer's real heat had departed with the Peddler. The last cutting of hay began

and was finished in the run of a week—that last one was always scant, and

ranchers and freeholders alike would curse it, scratching their heads and asking

themselves why they even bothered ... but come rainy, blowsy old March, with the

bamlofts and bins rapidly emptying, they always knew. In the Barony's

gar dens—the great ones of the ranchers, the smaller ones of the freeholders, and

the tiny backyard plots of the townsfolk—men and women and children appeared

in their old clothes and boots, their sons and brothers. They came with the

legs of their pants tied down firmly at the ankles, for in the time of the Huntress,

snakes and scorpions in plentiful numbers wandered east from the desert. By the

time old Demon Moon began to fatten, a line of rattlers would hang from the

hitching posts of both the Travellers' Rest and the merican tile across the street.

Other businesses would similarly decorate their hitching posts, but when the prize

for the most skins was given on Reaping Day, it was always the inn or the market

that won it. In the fields and gar dens, baskets to pick into were cast along the rows

by women with their hair tied up in kerchiefs and reaping charms hidden in their

bosoms. The last of the tomatoes were picked, the last of the cucumbers, the last

of the corn, the last of the peas and mince. Waiting behind them, as the days

sharpened and the autumn storms began to near, would come squash, sharproot,

pumpkins, and potatoes. In Mejis the time of reaping had begun, while overhead,

clearer and clearer on each starry night, the Huntress pulled her bow and looked

east over those strange, watery leagues no man or woman of Mid-World had ever

seen.

3

Those in the grip of a strong drug—hero?in, dev?il grass, true love—of?ten find

them?selves try?ing to main?tain a pre?car?ious bal?ance be? tween se?cre?cy and ec?sta?sy as

they walk the tightrope of their lives. Keep?ing one's bal an?ce on a tightrope is

dif?fi?cult un?der the sober?est cir?cum?stances; do?ing so while in a state of delir?ium is

all but im?pos?si?ble. Com?plete?ly im?pos?si?ble, in the long run.

Roland and Su?san were deliri?ous, but at least had the thin ad?van?tage of know?ing it.

And the se?cret would not have to be kept for?ev?er, but on?ly un?til Reap?ing Day Fair,

at the very longest. Things might end even soon?er than that, if the Big Cof?fin

Hunters broke cov?er. The ac?tu?al first move might be made by one of the oth?er

play?ers, Roland thought, but no mat?ter who moved first, Jonas and his men would

be there, a part of it. The part apt to be most dan?ger?ous to the three boys.

Roland and Su?san were care?ful—as care?ful as deliri?ous peo?ple could be, at any

rate. They nev?er met in the same place twice in a row, they nev?er met at the same

time twice in a row, they nev?er skulked on their way to their trysts. In Ham?bry,

rid?ers were com?mon but skulk?ers were no ticed. Su?san nev?er tried to cov?er her

“rid?ing out” by en?list?ing the help of a friend (al?though she had friends who would

have done her this ser?vice); peo?ple who need?ed al?ibis were peo?ple keep?ing se?crets.

She had a sense that Aunt Cord was grow?ing in?creas?ing?ly un?easy about her

rides— par?tic?ular?ly the ones she took in the ear?ly evenings —but so far she

ac?cept?ed Su?san's oft-?re?peat?ed rea?son for them: she need?ed time to be soli?tary, to

med?itate on her promise and to ac?cept her re?spon?si?bil?ity. Iron?ical?ly, these

sug?ges?tions had orig?inal?ly come from the witch of the Coos.

They met in the wil?low grove, in sev?er?al of the aban?doned
boathous?es which stood

crum?bling at the north?ern hook of the bay, in a herder's hut
far out in the

des?ola?tion of the Coos, in an aban?doned squat?ter's shack
hid?den in the Bad Grass.

The set?tings were, by and large, as sor?did as any of those in
which ad?dicts come

to?geth?er to prac?tice their vice, but Su?san and Roland didn't
see the rot?ting walls of

the shack or the holes in the roof of the hut or smell the moul?
der?ing nets in the

com?ers of the old soaked boathous?es. They were drugged,
stone in love, and to

them, ev?ery scar on the face of the world was a beau?ty-?mark.

Twice, ear?ly on in those deliri?ous weeks, they used the red
rock in the wall at the

back of the pavil?ion to ar?range meet?ings, and then some deep
voice spoke in?side

Roland's head, telling him there must be no more of it—the rock
might have been

just the thing for chil?dren play?ing at se?crets, but he and his
love were no longer

chil?dren; if they were dis?cov?ered, ban ish?ment would be the
luck?iest pun?ish?ment

they could hope for. The red rock was too con?spic?uous, and
writ?ing things

down—even mes?sages that were un?signed and de?lib?er?ate?
ly vague—was hor?ri?bly

dan?ger?ous.

Us?ing Sheemie felt safer to both of them. Be?neath his smil?ing
light-?mind?ed?ness

there was a sur?pris?ing depth of ... well, dis?cre?tion. Roland
had thought long and

hard be?fore set?tling on that word, and it was the right word:
an abil?ity to keep

silent that was more dig?ni?fied than mere cun?ning. Cun?ning
was out of Sheemie's

reach in any case, and al?ways would be—a man who couldn't
tell a lie with?out

shift?ing his eyes away from yours was a man who would nev?er
be con?sid?ered

cun?ning.

They used Sheemie half a dozen times over the five weeks when
their phys?ical

love burned at its hottest—three of those times were to make meet?ings, two were

to change meet?ing-?places, and one was to can?cel a tryst when Su?san spied rid?ers

from the Pi?ano Ranch sweep?ing for strays near the shack in the Bad Grass.

That deep, warn?ing voice nev?er spoke to Roland about Sheemie as it had about the

dan?gers of the red rock . . . but his con?science spoke to him, and when he fi?nal?ly

men?tioned this to Su?san (the two of them wrapped in a sad?dle-?blan?ket and ly?ing

naked in each oth?er's arms), he found that her con?science had been trou?bling her,

as well. It wasn't fair to put the boy in the way of their pos?si?ble trou?ble. Af?ter

com?ing to that con?clu?sion, Roland and Su?san ar?ranged their meet?ings strict?ly

be?tween the two of them. If she could not meet him, Su?san said, she would hang a

red shirt over the sill of her win?dow, as if to dry. If he could not meet her, he was

to leave a white stone in the north?east com?er of the yard, di?ag?onal?ly across the

road from Hock?ey's Liv?ery, where the town pump stood. As a last re?sort, they

would use the red rock in the pavil?ion, risky or not, rather than bring?ing Sheemie

in?to their af?fairs—their af?fair—again.

Cuth?bert and Alain watched Roland's de?scent in?to ad?dic?tion first with dis?be?lief,

en?vy, and un?easy amuse?ment, then with a species of silent hor?ror. They had been

sent to what was sup?posed to have been safe?ty and had dis?cov?ered a place of

con?spir?acy, in?stead; they had come to take cen?sus in a Barony where most of the

aris?toc?ra?cy had ap?par?ent?ly switched its al?legiance to the Af?fil?ia?tion's bit?ter?est

en?emy; they had made per?son?al ene?mies of three hard men who had prob?ably

killed enough folks to pop?ulate a fair-?sized grave?yard. Yet they had felt equal to

the sit?ua?tion, be?cause they had come here un?der the lead?er?ship of their friend, who

had at tained near-myth?ic sta?tus in their minds by best?ing
Cort—with a hawk as

his weapon!—and be?com?ing a gun?slinger at the un?heard-of
age of four?teen. That

they had been giv?en guns them?selves for this mis?sion had
meant a great deal to

them when they set out from Gilead, and noth?ing at all by the
time they be?gan to

re?al?ize the scope of what was go?ing on in Ham?bry?-town
and the Barony of which

it was a part. When that re?al?iza?tion came, Roland was the
weapon they count?ed

on. And now—

“He’s like a re?volver cast in?to wa?ter!” Cuth?bert ex?claimed
one eve ning, not long

af?ter Roland had rid?den away to meet Su?san. Be?yond the
bunkhouse porch,

Huntress rose in her first quar?ter. “Gods know if it’ll ev?er fire
again, even if it’s

fished out and dried off.”

“Hush, wait,” Alain said, and looked to?ward the porch rail.
Hop?ing to jol?ly

Cuth?bert out of his bad tem?per (a task that was quite easy un?
der or?di?nary

cir?cum?stances), Alain said: “Where’s the look?out? Gone to
bed ear?ly for once, has

he?”

This on?ly ir?ri?tat?ed Cuth?bert more. He hadn’t seen the
rook’s skull in days—he

couldn’t ex?act?ly say how many—and he took its loss as an ill
omen. “Gone, but

not to bed,” he replied, then looked bale?ful?ly to the west,
where Roland had

dis?ap?peared aboard his big old ga?loot of a horse. “Lost, I
reck?on. Like a cer?tain

fel?low’s mind and heart and good sense.”

“He’ll be all right,” Alain said awk?ward?ly. “You know him as
well as I do,

Bert—known him our whole lives, we have. He’ll be all right.”

Qui?et?ly, with?out even a trace of his nor?mal good hu?mor,
Cuth?bert said: “I don’t

feel I know him now.”

They had both tried to talk to Roland in their dif?fer?ent ways;
both re ceived a

sim?ilar re?sponse, which was no re?al re?sponse at all. The

dreamy (and per?haps

slight?ly trou?bled) look of ab?strac?tion in Roland's eyes during these one-?sid?ed

dis?cus?sions would have been fa?mil?iar to anyone who has ever tried to talk sense to

a drug ad?dict. It was a look that said Ro land's mind was oc?cu?pied by the shape of

Su?san's face, the smell of Su san's skin, the feel of Su?san's body. And oc?cu?pied

was a sil?ly word for it, one that fell short. It wasn't an oc?cu?pa?tion but an ob?ses?sion.

"I hate her a lit?tle for what she's done," Cuth?bert said, and there was a note in his

voice Alain had nev?er heard be?fore—a mix?ture of jeal?ousy, frus?tra?tion, and fear.

"Per?haps more than a lit?tle."

"You mustn't!" Alain tried not to sound shocked, but couldn't help it. "She isn't

re?spon?si?ble for—"

"Is she not? She went out to Cit?go with him. She saw what he saw. God knows

how much else he's told her af?ter they've fin?ished mak?ing the beast with two

backs. And she's all the way around the world from stupid. Just the way she's

man?aged her side of their af?fair shows that." Bert was think?ing, Alain guessed, of

her tidy lit?tle trick with the corvette. "She must know she's be?come part of the

prob?lem her?self. She must know that!"

Now his bit?ter?ness was fi?ght?en?ing?ly clear. He's jeal?ous of her for steal?ing his best

friend, Alain thought, but it doesn't stop there. He's jeal ous of his best friend, as

well, be?cause his best friend has won the most beau?ti?ful girl any of us have ev?er

seen.

Alain leaned over and grasped Cuth?bert's shoul?der. When Bert turned away from

his mo?rose ex?am?ina?tion of the door?yard to look at his friend, he was star?tled by

the grim?ness on Alain's face. "It's ka," Alain said.

Cuth?bert al?most sneered. "If I had a hot din?ner for ev?ery time some one blamed

theft or lust or some oth?er stu?pid?ity on ka—"

Alain's grip tightened until it became painful. Cuthbert could have pulled away but

didn't. He watched Alain closely. The joker was, temporarily, at least, gone.

"Blame is exactly what we two can't afford," Alain said. "Don't you see that? And

if it's karma that's swept them away, we needn't blame. We can't blame. We must rise

above it. We need him. And we may need her, too."

Cuthbert looked into Alain's eyes for what seemed to be a very long time. Alain

saw Bert's anger at war with his good sense. At last (and perhaps only for the time

being), good sense won out.

"All right, fine. It's karma, everybody's favorite whipping-boy. That's what the great

unknown world's for, after all, isn't it? So we don't have to take the blame for our

acts of stupidity? Now let go of me, Al, before you break my shoulder."

Alain let go and sat back in his chair, relieved. "Now if we only knew what to do

about the Drop. If we don't start counting there soon—"

"I've had an idea about that, actually," Cuthbert said. "It just needs a little working

out. I'm sure Roland could help ... if either of us can get his attention for a few

minutes, that is."

They sat for awhile without speaking, looking out at the doorway. Inside the

bunkhouse, the pigeons—another bone of contention between Roland and Bert

these days—cooed. Alain rolled himself a smoke. It was slow work, and the

finished product looked rather comical, but it held together when he lit it.

"Your father would stripe you raw if he saw that in your hand," Cuthbert

remarked, but he spoke with a certain admiration. By the time the following year's

Huntress came around, all three of them would be confirmed smokers, tanned

young men with most of the boyhood slapped out of their eyes.

Alain nodded. The strong Outer Crescent tobacco made him swimmy in the head

and raw in the throat, but a cigarette had a way of calm?ing his nerves, and right

now his nerves could use some calm?ing. He didn't know about Bert, but these days

he smelled blood on the wind. Pos?si?bly some of it would be their own. He wasn't

ex?act?ly fright?ened—not yet, at least— but he was very, very wor?ried.

4

Al?though they had been honed like hawks to?ward the guns since ear?ly child?hood,

Cuth?bert and Alain still car?ried an er?ro?neous be?lief com?mon to many boys their

age: that their el?ders were al?so their bet?ters, at least in such mat?ters as plan?ning

and wit; they ac?tu?al?ly be?lieved that grownups knew what they were do?ing. Roland

knew bet?ter, even in his love-?sick?ness, but his friends had for?got?ten that in the

game of Cas?tles, both sides wear the blind?fold. They would have been sur?prised to

find that at least two of the Big Cof?fin Hunters had grown ex?treme?ly ner?vous

about the three young men from In-?World, and ex?treme?ly tired of the wait?ing

game both sides had been play?ing.

One ear?ly morn?ing, as the Huntress neared the half, Reynolds and De?pape came

down?stairs to?geth?er from the sec?ond floor of the Trav?ellers' Rest. The main pub?lic

room was silent ex?cept for var?ious snores and phlegmy wheez?ings. In Ham?bry's

bus?iest bar, the par?ty was over for an oth?er night.

Jonas, ac?com?pa?nied by a silent guest, sat play?ing Chan?cel?lors' Pa tience at Coral's

ta?ble to the left of the batwing doors. Tonight he was wear?ing his duster, and his

breath smoked faint?ly as he bent over his cards. It wasn't cold enough to frost—not

quite yet—but the frost would come soon. The chill in the air left no doubt of that.

The breath of his guest al?so smoked. Kim?ba Rimer's skele?tal frame was all but

buried in a gray ser?ape lit with faint bands of or?ange. The two of them had been on

the edge of getting down to business when Roy and Clay (Pinch and Jilly, Rimer

thought) showed up, their plowing and planting in the second-floor cribs also

appeared over for another night.

"Elfred," Reynolds said, and then: "Sai Rimer."

Rimer nodded back, looking from Reynolds to Depepe with thin distaste. "Long

days and pleasant nights, gentlemen." Of course the world had moved on, he

thought. To find such low culls as these two in positions of importance proved it.

Jonas himself was only a little better.

"Might we have a word with you, Elfred?" Clay Reynolds asked. "We've been

talking, Roy and I—"

"Unwise," Jonas remarked in his wary voice. Rimer wouldn't be surprised to

find, at the end of his life, that the Death Angel had such a voice. "Talking can

lead to thinking, and thinking's dangerous for such as you boys. Like picking your nose with bullet-heads."

Depepe donkeyed his damned heehaw laughter, as if he didn't realize the joke was on him.

"Jonas, listen," Reynolds began, and then looked uncertainly at Rimer.

"You can talk in front of Sai Rimer," Jonas said, laying out a fresh line of cards.

"He is, after all, our chief employer. I play at Chancellor's Patience in his honor, so I do."

Reynolds looked surprised. "I thought . . . that is to say, I believed that Mayor

Thorin was ..."

"Hart Thorin wants to know none of the details of our arrangement with the Good

Man," Rimer said. "A share of the profits is all he requires in that line, Mr.

Reynolds. The Mayor's chief concern right now is that the Reaping Day Fair go

smoothly, and that his arrangements with the young lady be ... smoothly

consummated."

"Aye, that's a diplo?mat'ic turn o' speech for ye," Jonas said in a broad Mejis ac?cent.

"But since Roy looks a lit?tle per?plexed, I'll trans?late. May?or Thorin spends most of

his time in the jakes these days, yank?ing his willy-?pink and dream?ing his fist is

Su?san Del?ga?do's box. I'm bet?ting that when the shell's fi?nal?ly opened and her pearl

lies be?fore him, he'll nev?er pluck it—his heart'll ex?plode from ex?cite?ment, and he'll

drop dead atop her, so he will. Yar!"

More don?key laugh?ter from De?pape. He el?bowed Reynolds. "He's got it down,

don't he, Clay? Sounds just like em!"

Reynolds grinned, but his eyes were still wor?ried. Rimer man?aged a smile as thin

as a scum of Novem?ber ice, and point?ed at the sev?en which had just popped out of

the pack. "Red on black, my dear Jonas."

"I ain't your dear any?thing," Jonas said, putting the sev?en of dia monds on an eight

of shad?ows, "and you'd do well to re?mem?ber that." Then, to Reynolds and De?pape:

"Now what do you boys want? Rimer 'n me was just go?ing to have us a lit?tle palaver."

"Per?haps we could all put our heads to?geth?er," Reynolds said, putting a hand on

the back of a chair. "Kind of see if our think?ing match?es up."

"I think not," Jonas said, sweep?ing his cards to?geth?er. He looked ir?ri tat?ed, and

Clay Reynolds took his hand off the back of the chair in a hur?ry. "Say your say

and be done with it. It's late."

"We was think?ing it's time to go on out there to the Bar K," De?pape said. "Have a

look around. See if there's any?thing to back up what the old fel?la in Ritzy said."

"And see what else they've got out there," Reynolds put in. "It's get?ting close now,

El?dred, and we can't af?ford to take chances. They might have —"

"Aye? Guns? Elec?tric lights? Fairy-?wom?en in bot?tles? Who knows? I'll think about it. Clay."

“But—”

“I said I’ll think about it. Now go on up?stairs, the both of you, back to your own fairy-?wom?en.”

Reynolds and De?pape looked at him, looked at each oth?er, then backed away from the ta?ble. Rimer watched them with his thin smile.

At the foot of the stairs, Reynolds turned back. Jonas paused in the act of shuf?fling his cards and looked at him, tuft?ed eye?brows raised.

“We un?der?es?ti?mat?ed em once and they made us look like mon?keys. I don’t want it to hap?pen again. That’s all.”

“Your ass is still sore over that, isn’t it? Well, so is mine. And I tell you again,

they’ll pay for what they did. I have the bill ready, and when the time comes, I’ll

present it to them, with all in?ter?est du?ly not?ed. In the mean?time, they aren’t go?ing

to spook me in?to mak?ing the first move. Time is on our side, not theirs. Do you

un?der?stand that?”

“Yes.”

“Will you try to re?mem?ber it?”

“Yes,” Reynolds re?peat?ed. He seemed sat?is?fied.

“Roy? Do you trust me?”

“Aye, El?dred. To the end.” Jonas had praised him for the work he had done in

Ritzy, and De?pape had rolled in it the way a male dog rolls in the scent of a bitch.

“Then go on up, the both of you, and let me palaver with the boss and be done

with it. I’m too old for these late nights.”

When they were gone, Jonas dealt out a fresh line of cards, then looked around the

room. There were per?haps a dozen folks, in?clud?ing Sheb the pi?ano-?play?er and

Barkie the bounc?er, sleep?ing it off. No one was close enough to lis?ten to the low-

voiced con?ver?sa?tion of the two men by the door, even if one of the snor?ing

drunk?ards was for some rea?son on?ly sham?ming sleep. Jonas put a red queen on a

black knight, then looked up at Rimer. “Say your say.”

“Those two said it for me, ac?tu?al?ly. Sai De?pape will nev?er

be em?bar rassed by a

sur?plus of brains, but Reynolds is fair?ly smart for a gun?ny, isn't he?"

"Clay's trig when the moon's right and he's had a shave," Jonas agreed. "Are you

say?ing you came all the way from Seafront to tell me those three bab?bies need a

clos?er look?ing at?"

Rimer shrugged.

"Per?haps they do, and I'm the man to do it, if so—right enough. But what's there to

find?"

"That's to be seen," Rimer said, and tapped one of Jonas's cards. "There's a

Chan?cel?lor."

"Aye. Near as ug?ly as the one I'm sit?ting with." Jonas put the Chan cel?lor—it was

Paul—above his run of cards. The next draw un?cov?ered Luke, whom he put next

to Paul. That left Pe?ter and Matthew still lurk?ing in the bush. Jonas looked at

Rimer shrewd?ly. "You hide it bet?ter than my pals, but you're as ner?vous as they

are, un?der?neath. You want to know what's out at that bunkhouse? I'll tell you:

ex?tra boots, pic?tures of their mom?mies, socks that stink to high heav?en, stiff sheets

from boys who've been taught it's low-?class to chase af?ter the sheep . . . and guns

hid?den some?where. Un?der the floor?boards, like enough."

"You re?al?ly think they have guns?"

"Aye, Roy got the straight of that, all right. They're from Gilead, they're like?ly

from the line of Eld or from folk who like to think they're from it, and they're

like?ly 'pren?tices to the trade who've been sent on with guns they haven't earned

yet. I won?der a bit about the tall one with the I-?don't-?give-?a-?shit look in his

eyes—he might al?ready be a gun?slinger, I sup?pose—but is it like?ly? I don't think

so. Even if he is, I could take him in a fair go. I know it, and he does, too."

"Then why have they been sent here?"

"Not be?cause those from the In?ner Ba?ronies sus?pect your

trea?son, sai Rimer—be
easy on that score.”

Rimer’s head poked out of his ser?ape as he sat up straight, and his face stiff?ened.

“How dare you call me a traitor? How dare you?”

El?dred Jonas fa?vored Ham?bry’s Min?is?ter of In?ven?to?ry with an un pleas?ant smile. It

made the white-?haired man look like a wolver?ine. “I’ve called things by their right

names my whole life, and I won’t stop now. All that needs mat?ter to you is that

I’ve nev?er dou?ble-?crossed an em?ploy?er.“

”If I didn’t be?lieve in the cause of—“

”To hell with what you be?lieve! It’s late and I want to go to bed. The folk in New

Canaan and Gilead haven’t the fog?gi?est idea of what does or doesn’t go on out here

on the Cres?cent; there aren’t many of em who’ve ev?er been here, I’d wa?ger. Them

are too busy try?ing to keep ev?ery?thing from falling down around their ears to do

much trav?el?ing these days. No, what they know is all from the pic?ture?books they

was read out of when they ‘us bab?bies them?selves: hap?py cow?boys gal?lop?ing af?ter

stock, hap?py fish?er?men pulling whop?pers in?to their boats, folks clog?ging at bam-

rais?ings and drink?ing big pots o’ graf in Green Heart pavil?ion. For the sake of the

Man Je?sus, Rimer, don’t go dense on me—I deal with that day in and day out.“

”They see Mejis as a place of qui?et and safe?ty.“

”Aye, bu?col?ic splen?dor, just so, no doubt about it. They know that their whole way

o’ life—all that no?bil?ity and chival?ry and an?ces?tor-?wor?ship—is on fire. The fi?nal

bat?tle may take place as much as two hun?dred wheels north?west of their bor?ders,

but when Far?son us?es his fire-?car?riages and robots to wipe out their army, trou?ble

will come south fast. There are those from the In?ner Ba?ronies who’ve smelled this

com?ing for twen?ty years or more. They didn’t send these brats here to dis?cov?er

your se?crets, Rimer; folks such as these don’t send their bab?

bies in?to dan?ger on

pur pose. They sent em here to get em out of the way, that's all. That doesn't make

em blind or stupid, but for the sake of the gods, let's be sane. They're kid?dies;'

"What else might you find, should you go out there?"

"Some way of send?ing mes?sages, may?hap. A he?li?ograph's the most like?ly. And out

be?yond Eye?bolt, a shep?herd or maybe a free?hold?er sus?cep tible to a

bribe—some?one they've trained to catch the mes?sage and ei? ther flash it on or car?ry

it afoot. But be?fore long it'll be too late for mes?sages to do any good, won't it?"

"Per?haps, but it's not too late yet. And you're right. Kid?dies or not, they wor?ry me."

"You've no cause, I tell you. Soon enough, I'll be wealthy and you'll be down?right

rich. May?or your?self, if you want. Who'd stand to stop you? Thorin? He's a joke.

Coral? She'd help you string him up, I wot. Or per haps you'd like to be a Baron, if

such of?fices be re?vived?" He saw a mo men?tary gleam in Rimer's eyes and

laughed. Matthew came out of the deck, and Jonas put him up with the oth?er

Chan?cel?lors. "Yar, I see that's what you've got your heart set on. Gems is nice, and

for gold that goes twice, but there's noth?ing like hav?ing folk bow and scrape be?fore

ye, is there?"

Rimer said, "They should have been on the cow?boy side by now."

Jonas's hands stopped above the lay?out of cards. It was a thought that had crossed

his own mind more than once, es?pe?cial?ly over the last two weeks or so.

"How long do you think it takes to count our nets and boats and chart out the fish-

hauls?" Rimer asked. "They should be over on the Drop, count ing cows and

hors?es, look?ing through barns, study?ing the foal?-charts. They should have been

there two weeks ago, in fact. Un?less they al?ready know what

they'd find."

Jonas understood what Rimer was implying, but couldn't believe it. Wouldn't

believe it. Not such a depth of slyness from boys who only had to shave once a week.

"No," he said. "That's your own guilty heart talking to you. They're just so

determined to do it right that they're creeping along like old folks with bad eyes.

They'll be over on the Drop soon enough, and counting their little hearts out."

"And if they're not?"

A good question. Get rid of them somehow, Jonas supposed. An am bush,

perhaps. Three shots from cover, no more babies. There'd be ill feeling

afterward—the boys were well liked in town—but Rimer could handle that until

Fair Day, and after the Reap it wouldn't matter. Still—

"I'll have a look around out at the Bar K," Jonas said at last. "By my self—I won't

have Clay and Roy tramping along behind me."

"That sounds fine."

"Perhaps you'd like to come and lend a hand."

Kimba Rimer smiled his icy smile. "I think not."

Jonas nodded, and began to deal again. Going out to the Bar K would be a bit

risky, but he didn't expect any real problem—especially if he went alone. They

were only boys, after all, and gone for much of each day.

"When may I expect a report, sai Jonas?"

"When I'm ready to make it. Don't crowd me."

Rimer lifted his thin hands and held them, palms out, to Jonas. "Cry your pardon,

sai," he said.

Jonas nodded, slightly mollified. He flipped up another card. It was Peter,

Chanclor of Keys. He put the card in the top row and then stared at it, combing

his fingers through his long white hair as he did. He looked from the card to

Rimer, who looked back, eyebrows raised.

"You smile," Rimer said.

"Yar!" Jonas said, and began to deal again. "I'm happy! All the

Chan cel?lors are

out. I think I'm go?ing to win this game."

5

For Rhea, the time of the Huntress had been a time of frus?tra?tion and un?sat?is?fied

crav?ing. Her plans had gone awry, and thanks to her cat's hideous?ly mist?imed leap,

she didn't know how or why. The young cull who'd tak?en Su?san Del?ga?do's cher?ry

had like?ly stopped her from chop ping her scurf. . . but how? And who was he

re?al?ly? She won?dered that more and more, but her cu?rios?ity was sec?ondary to her

fury. Rhea of the Coos wasn't used to be?ing balked.

She looked across the room to where Musty crouched and watched her care?ful?ly.

Or?di?nar?ily he would have re?laxed in the fire?place (he seemed to like the cool drafts

that swirled down the chim?ney), but since she had singed his fur. Musty pre?ferred

the wood?pile. Giv?en Rhea's mood, that was prob?ably wise. "You're lucky I let ye

live, ye war?lock," the old wom?an grum?bled.

She turned back to the ball and be?gan to make pass?es above it, but the glass on?ly

con?tin?ued to swirl with bright pink light—not a sin?gle im?age ap?peared. Rhea got

up at last, went to the door, threw it open, and looked out on the night sky. Now

the moon had waxed a lit?tle past the half, and the Huntress was com?ing clear on its

bright face. Rhea di?rect?ed the stream of foul lan?guage she didn't quite dare to

di?rect at the glass (who knew what en?ti?ty might lurk in?side it, wait?ing to take

of?fense at such talk?) up at the wom?an in the moon. Twice she slammed her bony

old fist in?to the door-?lin?tel as she cursed, dredg?ing up ev?ery dirty word she could

think of, even the pot?ty-?mouth words chil?dren throw at each oth?er in the dust of

the play yard. Nev?er had she been so an?gry. She had giv?en the girl a com mand,

and the girl, for what?ev?er rea?sons, had dis?obeyed. For stand?ing against Rhea of the

Coos, the bitch de?serted to die.

“But not right away,” the old wom?an whis?pered. “First she should be rolled in the

dirt, then pissed on un?til the dirt’s mud and her fine blonde hair’s full of it.

Hu?mil?iat?ed ... hurt . . . spat on . . .“

She slammed her fist against the door’s side again, and this time blood flew from

the knuck?les. It wasn’t just the girl’s fail?ure to obey the hyp?not?ic com?mand. There

was an?oth?er mat?ter, re?lat?ed but much more se ri?ous: Rhea her?self was now too

up?set to use the glass, ex?cept for brief and un?pre?dictable pe?ri?ods of time. The hand-

pass?es she made over it and the in?can?ta?tions she mut?tered to it were, she knew,

use?less; the words and ges?tures were just the way she fo?cused her will. That was

what the glass re?spond?ed to—will and con?cen?trat?ed thought. Now, thanks to the

trol?lop of a girl and her boy lover, Rhea was too an?gry to sum?mon the smooth

con?cen?tra?tion need?ed to part the pink fog which swirled in?side the ball. She was,

in fact, too an?gry to see.

”How can I make it like it was?” Rhea asked the half-?glimpsed wom?an in the

moon. ”Tell me! Tell me!“ But the Huntress told her noth ing, and at last Rhea

went back in?side, suck?ing at her bleed?ing knuck?les.

Musty saw her com?ing and squeezed in?to the cob?web?by space be tween the

wood?pile and the chim?ney.

CHAP?TER II

THE GIRL AT

THE WIN?DOW

1

Now the Huntress ”filled her bel?ly,” as the old-?timers said—even at noon she

could be glimpsed in the sky, a pal?lid vam?pire wom?an caught in bright au?tumn

sun?light. In front of busi?ness?es such as the Trav?ellers’ Rest and on the porch?es of

such large ranch hous?es as Lengyll’s Rock?ing B and Ren?frew’s Lazy Su?san, stuffy-

guys with heads full of straw above their old overalls began to appear. Each wore

his sombrero; each held a basket of produce cradled in his arms; each looked out

at the emptying world with stitched white-cross eyes.

Wagons filled with squashes clogged the roads; bright orange drifts of pumpkins

and bright magenta drifts of sharproot lay against the sides of barns. In the fields,

the potato-carts rolled and the pickers followed behind. In front of the Hamery

Merchantile, reaping charms appeared like magic, hanging from the carved Guardians

like wind-chimes.

All over Mejis, girls sewed their Reaping Night costumes (and some times wept

over them, if the work went badly) as they dreamed of the boys they would dance

within the Green Heart pavilion. Their little brothers began to have trouble

sleeping as they thought of the rides and the games and the prizes they might win

at the carnival. Even their elders sometimes lay awake in spite of their sore hands

and aching backs, thinking about the pleasures of the Reap.

Summer had slipped away with a final flirt of her green gown; harvest-time had

arrived.

2

Rhea cared not a fig for Reaping dances or carnival games, but she could no more

sleep than those who did. Most nights she lay on her stinking pallet until dawn, her

skull thudding with rage. On a night not long after Jonas's conversation with

Chancelor Rimer, she determined to drink her self into oblivion. Her mood was

not improved when she found that her grandfather was almost empty; she blustered

the air with her curses.

She was drawing in breath for a fresh string of them when an idea struck her. A

wonderful idea. A brilliant idea. She had wanted Susan Delgado to cut off her

hair. That hadn't worked, and she didn't know why. . . but she

did know some?thing

about the girl, didn't she? Some?thing in?ter es?ting, aye, so it was, wery in?ter?est?ing, in?deed.

Rhea had no de?sire to go to Thorin with what she knew; she had a fond (and

fool?ish, like?ly) hope that the May?or had for?got?ten about his won?der?ful glass ball.

But the girl's aunt, now . . . sup?pose Cordelia Del?ga?do were to dis?cov?er that not

on?ly was her niece's vir?gin?ity lost, the girl was well on her way to be?com?ing a

prac?ticed trol?lop? Rhea didn't think Cordelia would go to the May?or, ei?ther—the

wom?an was a prig but not a fool—yet it would set the cat among the pi?geons just

the same, wouldn't it?

“Waow!”

Think?ing of cats, there was Musty, stand?ing on the stoop in the moon light,

look?ing at her with a mix?ture of hope and mis?trust. Rhea, grin?ning hideous?ly,

opened her arms. “Come to me, my pre?cious! Come, my sweet one!”

Musty, un?der?stand?ing all was for?giv?en, rushed in?to his mis?tress's arms and be?gan

to purr loud?ly as Rhea licked along his sides with her old and yel?low?ing tongue.

That night the Coos slept sound?ly for the first time in a week, and when she took

the glass ball in?to her arms the fol?low?ing morn?ing, its mists cleared for her at

once. She spent the day in thrall to it, spy?ing on peo?ple she de?test?ed, drink?ing lit?tle

and eat?ing noth?ing. Around sun?set, she came out of her trance enough to re?al?ize

she had as yet done noth?ing about the saucy lit?tle jade. But that was all right; she

saw how it could be done . . . and she could watch all the re?sults in the glass! All

the protests, all the shout?ing and re?crim?ina?tions! She would see Su?sane's tears. That

would be the best, to see her tears.

“A lit?tle har?vest of my own,” she said to Er?mot, who now came slith er?ing up her

leg to?ward the place where she liked him best. There weren't many men who could

do you like Er?mot could do you, no in?deed. Sit?ting there with a lap?ful of snake,

Rhea be?gan to laugh.

3

"Re?mem?ber your promise," Alain said ner?vous?ly as they heard the ap proach?ing

beat of Rush?er's hoofs. "Keep your tem?per."

"I will," Cuth?bert said, but he had his doubts. As Roland rode around the long

wing of the bunkhouse and in?to the yard, his shad?ow trail?ing out in the sun?set

light, Cuth?bert clenched his hands ner?vous?ly. He willed them to open, and they

did. Then, as he watched Roland dis?mount, they rolled them?selves closed again,

the nails dig?ging in?to his palms.

An?oth?er go?round, Cuth?bert thought. Gods, but I'm sick of them. Sick to death.

Last night's had been about the pi?geons—again. Cuth?bert want?ed to use one to

send a mes?sage back west about the oil tankers; Roland still did not. So they had

ar?gued. Ex?cept (here was an?oth?er thing which in?fu?ri?at?ed him, that rubbed against

his nerves like the sound of the thin?ny) Roland did not ar?gue. These days Roland

did not deign to ar?gue. His eyes al?ways kept that dis?tant look, as if on?ly his body

was here. The rest of him— mind, soul, spir?it, ka—was with Su?sana Del?ga?do.

"No," he had said sim?ply. "It's too late for such."

"You can't know that," Cuth?bert had ar?gued. "And even if it's too late for help to

come from Gilead, it's not too late for ad?vice to come from Gilead. Are you so

blind you can't see that?"

"What ad?vice can they send us?" Roland hadn't seemed to hear the raw?ness in

Cuth?bert's voice. His own voice was calm. Rea?son?able. And ut?ter?ly dis?con?nect?ed,

Cuth?bert thought, from the ur?gen?cy of the sit?ua?tion.

"If we knew that," he had replied, "we wouldn't have to ask, Roland, would we?"

"We can on?ly wait and stop them when they make their move.

It's com?fort you're

look?ing for, Cuth?bert, not ad?vice."

You mean wait while you fuck her in as many ways and in as many places as you

can imag?ine, Cuth?bert thought. In?side, out?side, right?side up and up?side down.

"You're not think?ing clear?ly about this," Cuth?bert had said cold?ly. He'd heard

Alain's gasp. Nei?ther of them had ev?er said such a thing to Roland in their lives,

and once it was out, he'd wait?ed un?easi?ly for what ev?er ex?plo?sion might fol?low.

None did. "Yes," Roland replied, "I am." And he had gone in?to the bunkhouse

with?out an?oth?er word.

Now, watch?ing Roland unc?inch Rush?er's girths and pull the sad?dle from his back,

Cuth?bert thought: You 're not, you know. But you bet?ter think clear?ly about this.

By all the gods, you 'd bet?ter.

"Hile," he said as Roland car?ried the sad?dle over to the porch and set it on the step.

"Busy af?ter?noon?" He felt Alain kick his an?kle and ig nored it.

"I've been with Su?san," Roland said. No de?fense, no de?mur, no ex cuse. And for a

mo?ment Cuth?bert had a vi?sion of shock?ing clar?ity: he saw the two of them in a hut

some?where, the late af?ter?noon sun shin?ing through holes in the roof and dap?pling

their bod?ies. She was on top, rid?ing him. Cuth?bert saw her knees on the old,

spongy boards, and the ten?sion in her long thighs. He saw how tanned her arms

were, how white her bel?ly. He saw how Roland's hands cupped the globes of her

breasts, squeez?ing them as she rocked back and forth above him, and he saw how

the sun lit her hair, turn?ing it in?to a fine?-?spun net.

Why do you al?ways have to be first? he cried at Roland in his mind. Why does it

al?ways have to be you? Gods damn you, Roland! Gods damn you!

"We were on the docks," Cuth?bert said, his tone a thin im?ita?

tion of his usual

bright?ness. "Count?ing boots and ma?rine tools and what are called clam-?drags.

What an amus?ing time of it we've had, eh, Al?"

"Did you need me to help you do that?" Roland asked. He went back to Rush?er,

and took off the sad?dle-?blan?ket. "Is that why you sound an?gry?"

"If I sound an?gry, it's be?cause most of the fish?er?men are laugh?ing at us be?hind our

backs. We keep com?ing back and com?ing back. Roland, they think we're fools."

Roland nod?ded. "All to the good," he said.

"Per?haps," Alain said qui?et?ly, "but Rimer doesn't think we're fools—it's in the

way he looks at us when we pass. Nor does Jonas. And if they don't think we're

fools, Roland, what do they think?"

Roland stood on the sec?ond step, the sad?dle-?blan?ket hang?ing for?got ten over his

arm. For once they ac?tu?al?ly seemed to have his at?ten?tion, Cuth?bert thought. Glo?ry

be and will won?ders nev?er cease.

"They think we're avoid?ing the Drop be?cause we al?ready know what's there,"

Roland said. "And if they don't think it, they soon will."

"Cuth?bert has a plan."

Roland's gaze—mild, in?ter?est?ed, al?ready start?ing to be not there again—shift?ed to

Cuth?bert. Cuth?bert the jok?er. Cuth?bert the 'pren?tice, who had in no way earned the

gun he'd car?ried east to the Out?er Cres?cent. Cuth?bert the vir?gin and eter?nal sec?ond.

Gods, I don't want to hate him. I don't, but now it's so easy.

"We two should go and see Sher?iff Av?ery to?mor?row," Cuth?bert said. "We will

present it as a cour?tesy vis?it. We have al?ready es?tab?lished our selves as three

cour?te?ous, if slight?ly stupid, young fel?lows, have we not?"

"To a fault," Roland agreed, smil?ing.

"We'll say that we've fi?nal?ly fin?ished with the sea?coast side of Ham?bry, and we

hope to be ev?ery bit as metic?ulous on the farm and cow?boy side. But we cer?tain?ly

don't want to cause trou?ble or be in any?one's way. It is, af?ter

all, the bus?iest time of

year—for ranch?ers as well as farm?ers— and even citi?ied fools such as our?selves

will be aware of that. So we'll give the good Sher?iff a list—"

Roland's eyes lit up. He tossed the blan?ket over the porch rail, grabbed Cuth?bert

around the shoul?ders, and gave him a rough hug. Cuth bert could smell a lilac

scent around Roland's col?lar and felt an in?sane but pow?er?ful urge to clamp his

hands around Roland's throat and try to stran gle him. In?stead, he gave him a

per?func?to?ry clap on the back in re?turn.

Roland drew away, grin?ning wide?ly. "A list of the ranch?es we'll be vis?it?ing," he

said. "Aye! And with fore?warn?ing, they can move any stock they'd like us not to

see on to the next ranch, or the last one. The same for tack, feed, equip?ment. . . it's

mas?ter?ful, Cuth?bert! You're a ge?nius!"

"Far from that," Cuth?bert said. "I've just spared a lit?tle time to think about a

prob?lem that con?cerns us all. That con?cerns the en?tire Af?fil?ia?tion, may?hap. We

need to think. Wouldn't you say?"

Alain winced, but Roland didn't seem to no?tice. He was still grin?ning. Even at

four?teen, such an ex?pres?sion on his face was trou?bling. The truth was that when

Roland grinned, he looked slight?ly mad. "Do you know, they may even move in a

fair num?ber of mu?ties for us to look at, just so we'll con?tin?ue to be?lieve the lies

they've al?ready told about the im?pu?ri?ty of their stock?lines." He paused, seem?ing to

think, and then said: "Why don't you and Alain go and see the Sher?iff, Bert? That

would do very well, I think."

At this point Cuth?bert near?ly threw him?self at Roland, want?ing to scream Yes, why

not? Then you could spend to?mor?row morn?ing prong?ing her as well as to?mor?row

af?ter?noon! You id?iot! You thought?less lovestruck id?iot!

It was Al who saved him—saved them all, per?haps.

"Don't be a fool," he said sharply, and Roland wheeled to?ward

him, looking

surprised. He wasn't used to sharpness from that quarter. "You're our leader,

Roland—seen that way by Thorin, by Avery, by the townsfolk. Seen that way by us as well."

"No one appointed me—"

"No one needed to!" Cuthbert shouted. "You won your guns! These folk would

hardly believe it—I hardly believe it myself just lately—but you are a gunslinger.

You have to go! Plain as the nose on your face! It doesn't matter which of us

accompanies you, but you have to go!" He could say more, much more, but if he

did, where would it end? With their fellowship broken beyond repair, likely. So he

clamped his mouth shut—no need for Alain to kick him this time—and once

again waited for the explosion. Once again, none came.

"All right," Roland said in his new way—that mild it-doesn't-much-matter way

that made Cuthbert feel like biting him to wake him up. "Tomorrow morning.

You and I, Bert. Will eight suit you?"

"Down to the ground," Cuthbert said. Now that the discussion was over and the

decision made, Bert's heart was beating wildly and the muscles in his upper thighs

felt like rubber. It was the way he'd felt after their confrontation with the Big

Coffin Hunters.

"We'll be at our prettiest," Roland said. "Nice boys from the Innerns with good

intentions but not many brains. Fine." And he went inside, no longer grinning

(which was a relief) but smiling gently.

Cuthbert and Alain looked at each other and let out their breath in a mutual rush.

Cuthbert cocked his head toward the yard, and went down the steps. Alain

followed, and the two boys stood in the center of the dirt rectangle with the

bunkhouse at their backs. To the east, the rising full moon was hidden behind a

scrim of clouds. ‘

“She’s tranced him,” Cuthbert said. “Whether she means to or not, she’ll kill us all

in the end. Wait and see if she don’t.”

“You shouldn’t say such, even in jest.”

“All right, she’ll crown us with the jew’els of Eld and we’ll live for’ev’er.”

“You have to stop be’ing an’gry at him, Bert. You have to.”

Cuthbert looked at him bleak’ly. “I can’t.”

4

The great storms of autumn were still a month or more distant, but the following

morn’ing dawned drizzly and gray. Roland and Cuthbert wrapped themselves in

scraps and headed for town, leaving Alain to the few home place chores. Tucked

in Roland’s belt was the schedule of farms and ranches—begin’ning with the three

small spreads owned by the Barony—the three of them had worked out the

pre’vious evening. The pace this schedule suggested was almost ludicrously

slow—it would keep them on the Drop and in the orchards almost until Year’s End

Fair—but it con’formed to the pace they had already set on the docks.

Now the two of them rode silently toward town, both lost in their own thoughts.

Their way took them past the Delgado house. Roland looked up and saw Susan

sitting in her window, a bright vision in the gray light of that fall morn’ing. His

heart leaped up and although he didn’t know it then, it was how he would

remember her most clearly for’ev’er after—love’ly Susan, the girl at the window.

So do we pass the ghosts that haunt us later in our lives; they sit undramatic’ly by

the roadside like poor beggars, and we see them only from the corners of our eyes,

if we see them at all. The idea that they have been waiting there for us rarely if

ever crosses our minds. Yet they do wait, and when we have passed, they gather

up their bundles of memory and fall in behind, treading in

our foot?steps and

catch ing up, lit?tle by lit?tle.

Roland raised a hand to her. It went to?ward his mouth at first, want?ing to send her

a kiss, but that would be mad?ness. He lift?ed the hand be?fore it could touch his lips

and ticked a fin?ger off his fore?head in?stead, of?fer?ing a saucy lit?tle salute.

Su?san smiled and re?turned it in kind. None saw Cordelia, who had gone out in the

driz?zle to check on the last of her squash and sharp?root. That la?dy stood where she

was, a som?brero yanked down on her head al most to the eye?line, half-?hid?den by

the stuffy-?guy guard?ing the pump?kin patch. She watched Roland and Cuth?bert

pass (Cuth?bert she bare?ly saw; her in?ter?est was in the oth?er one). From the boy on

horse?back she looked up to Su?san, sit?ting there in her win?dow, hum?ming as

blithe?ly as a bird in a gild?ed cage.

A sharp splin?ter of sus?pi?cion whis?pered its way in?to Cordelia's heart. Su?san's

change of tem?per?ament—from al?ter?nat?ing bouts of sor?row and fear?ful anger to a

kind of dazed but main?ly cheer?ful ac?cep?tance—had been so sud?den. May?hap it

wasn't ac?cep?tance at all.

"Ye're mad," she whis?pered to her?self, but her hand re?mained tight on the haft of

the ma?chete she held. She dropped to her knees in the mud?dy gar?den and abrupt?ly

be?gan chop?ping sharp?root vines, toss?ing the roots them?selves to?ward the side of

the house with quick, ac?cu?rate throws. "There's noth?ing be?tween em. I'd know.

Chil?dren of such an age have no more dis?cre?tion than . . . than the drunks in the

Rest."

But the way they had smiled. The way they had smiled at each oth?er.

"Per?fect?ly nor?mal," she whis?pered, chop?ping and throw?ing. She cut a sharp?root

near?ly in half, ru?in?ing it, not notic?ing. The whis?per?ing was a habit she'd picked up

on?ly re?cent?ly, as Reap Day neared and the stress?es of cop?ing with her broth?er's

trou?ble?some daugh?ter mount?ed. "Folks smile at each oth?er, that's all."

The same for the salute and Su?san's re?turn?ing wave. Be?low, the hand some

cav?alier, ac?knowl?edg?ing the pret?ty maid; above, the maid her?self, pleased to be

ac?knowl?edged by such as he. It was youth call?ing to youth, that was all. And yet...

The look in his eyes . . . and the look in hers.

Non?sense, of course. But—

But you saw some?thing else.

Yes, per?haps. For a mo?ment it had seemed to her that the young man was go?ing to

blow Su?san a kiss . . . then had re?mem?bered him?self at the last mo?ment and turned

it in?to a salute, in?stead.

Even if ye did see such a thing, it means noth?ing. Young cav?aliers are saucy,

es?pe?cial?ly when out from be?neath the gaze of their fa?thers. And these three

al?ready have a his?to?ry, as ye well know.

All true enough, but none of it re?moved that chilly splin?ter from her heart.

5

Jonas an?swered Roland's knock and let the two boys in?to the Sher?iff's of fice. He

was wear?ing a Deputy's star on his shirt, and looked at them with ex?pres?sion?less

eyes. "Boys," he said. "Come in out of the wet."

He stepped back to al?low them en?trance. His limp was more pro nounced than

Roland had ev?er seen it; the wet weath?er was play?ing it up, he sup?posed.

Roland and Cuth?bert stepped in. There was a gas heater in the cor ner—tilled from

"the can?dle" at Cit?go, no doubt—and the big room, which had been cool on the

day they had first come here, was stu?porous?ly hot. The three cells held five woe?ful-

look?ing drunks, two pairs of men and a wom?an in the cen?ter cell by her?self, sit?ting

on the bunk with her legs spread wide, dis?play?ing a broad ex?panse of red draw?ers.

Roland feared that if she got her finger any farther up her nose, she might never

retrieve it. Clay Reynolds was leaning against the notice-board, picking his teeth

with a broomstraw. Sitting at the roll-top desk was Deputy Dave, stroking his chin

and frowning through his monocle at the board which had been set up there.

Roland wasn't at all surprised to see that he and Bert had interrupted a game of

Cashtles.

"Well, look here, Elfred!" Reynolds said. "It's two of the In-World boys! Do your

momies know you're out, fellows?"

"They do," Cuthbert said brightly. "And you're looking very well, sai Reynolds.

The wet weather's soothed your pox, has it?"

Without looking at Bert or losing his pleasant little smile, Roland shot an elbow

into his friend's shoulder. "Pardon my friend, sai. His humour regularly transgresses

the bounds of good taste; he doesn't seem able to help it. There's no need for us to

scratch at one another—we've agreed to let bygones be bygones, haven't we?"

"Aye, certainly, all a misunderstanding," Jonas said. He limped back across to the

desk and the game-board. As he sat down on his side of it, his smile turned to a

sour little grimace. "I'm worse than an old dog," he said. "Someone ought to put

me down, so they should. Earth's cold but painless, eh, boys?"

He looked back at the board and moved a man around to the side of his Hillock.

He had begun to Cashtle, and was thus vulnerable . . . although not very, in this

case, Roland thought; Deputy Dave didn't look like much in the way of

competition.

"I see you're working for the Barony salt now," Roland said, nodding at the star on

Jonas's shirt.

"Salt's what it amounts to," Jonas said, companionably enough. "A fellow went leg-

broke. I'm helping out, that's all."

"And sai Reynolds? Sai De?pape? Are they help?ing out as well?"

"Yar, I reck?on," Jonas said. "How goes your work among the fish?er-?folk? Slow, I hear."

"Done at last. The work wasn't so slow as we were. But com?ing here in dis?grace

was enough for us—we have no in?ten?tion of leav?ing that way. Slow and steady

wins the race, they say."

"So they do," Jonas agreed. "Who?ev?er 'they' are."

From some?where deep?er in the build?ing there came the whoosh of a wa?ter-?stool

flush?ing. All the com?forts of home in the Ham?bry Sher?iff's, Roland thought. The

flush was soon fol?lowed by heavy foot?steps de scend?ing a stair?case, and a few

mo?ments lat?er, Herk Av?ery ap?peared. With one hand he was buck?ling his belt;

with the oth?er he mopped his broad and sweaty fore?head. Roland ad?mired the

man's dex?ter?ity.

"Whew!" the Sher?iff ex?claimed. "Them beans I ate last night took the short?cut, I

tell ye." He looked from Roland to Cuth?bert and then back to Roland. "Why, boys!

Too wet for net-?count?ing, is it?"

"Sai Dear?born was just say?ing that their net-?count?ing days are at an end," Jonas

said. He combed back his long hair with the tips of his fin gers. Be?yond him, Clay

Reynolds had re?sumed his slouch against the no?tice-?board, look?ing at Roland and

Cuth?bert with open dis?like.

"Aye? Well, that's fine, that's fine. What's next, young?sters? And is there any way

we here can help ye? For that's what we like to do best, lend a hand where a hand's

need?ed. So it is."

"Ac?tu?al?ly, you could help us," Roland said. He reached in?to his belt and pulled out

the list. "We have to move on to the Drop, but we don't want to in?con?ve?nience

any?one."

Grin?ning huge?ly, Deputy Dave slid his Squire all the way

around his own Hillock.

Jonas Cas?tled at once, rip?ping open Dave's en?tire left flank. The grin fad?ed from

Dave's face, leav?ing a puz?zled empti?ness. "How'd ye man?age that?"

"Easy." Jonas smiled, then pushed back from the desk to in?clude the oth?ers in his

re?gard. "You want to re?mem?ber, Dave, that I play to win. I can't help it; it's just

my na?ture." He turned his full at?ten?tion to Roland. His smile broad?ened. "Like the

scor?pi?on said to the maid?en as she lay dy ing, 'You knowed I was poi?son when

you picked me up.' "

6

When Su?san came in from feed?ing the live?stock, she went di?rect?ly to the cold-

pantry for the juice, which was her habit. She didn't see her aunt stand?ing in the

chim?ney com?er and watch?ing her, and when Cordelia spoke, Su?san was star?tled

bad?ly. It wasn't just the un?ex?pect?ed?ness of the voice; it was the cold?ness of it.

"Do ye know him?"

The juice-?jug slipped in her fin?gers, and Su?san put a steady?ing hand be?neath it.

Or?ange juice was too pre?cious to waste, es?pe?cial?ly this late in the year. She turned

and saw her aunt by the wood?box. Cordelia had hung her som?brero on a hook in

the en?try?way, but she still wore her ser?ape and mud?dy boots. Her cuchil?lo lay on

top of the stacked wood, with green strands of sharp?root vine still trail?ing from its

edge. Her tone was cold, but her eyes were hot with sus?pi?cion.

A sud?den clar?ity filled Su?san's mind and all of her sens?es. If you say "No, " you're

damned, she thought. If you even ask who, you may be damned. You must say—

"I know them both," she replied in off?hand fash?ion. "I met them at the par?ty. So

did you. Ye fright?ened me, Aunt."

"Why did he salute ye so?"

"How can I know? Per?haps he just felt like it."

Her aunt bolt?ed for?ward, slipped in her mud?dy boots, re?

gained her balance, and

seized Su?san by the arms. Now her eyes were blazing. "Be'n't in?so?lent with me,

girl! Be'n't haughty with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty, or I'll—"

Su?san pulled back?ward so hard that Cordelia staggered and might have fallen

again, if the table had not been handy to grab. Behind her, muddy foot?tracks

stood out on the clean kitchen floor like accusations. "Call me that again and I'll . .

. I'll slap thee!" Su?san cried. "So I will!"

Cordelia's lips drew back from her teeth in a dry, ferocious smile. "Ye'd slap your

father's only living blood kin? Would ye be so bad?"

"Why not? Do ye not slap me, Aunt?"

Some of the heat went out of her aunt's eyes, and the smile left her mouth. "Su?san!

Hardly ever! Not half a dozen times since ye were a toddler who would grab

anything her hands could reach, even a pot of boiling water on the—"

"It's with thy mouth thee most?ly hits nowa?days," Su?san said. "I've put up with

it—more fool me—but am done with it now. I'll have no more. If I'm old enough

to be sent to a man's bed for money, I'm old enough for ye to keep a civil tongue

when ye speak to me."

Cordelia opened her mouth to defend herself—the girl's anger had startled her, and

so had her accusations—and then she realized how clever?ly she was being led

away from the subject of the boys. Of the boy.

"Ye only know him from the party, Su?san? It's Dear?born I mean." As I think ye

well know.

"I've seen him about town," Su?san said. She met her aunt's eyes steadily, although

it cost her an effort; lies would follow half?truths as dark followed dusk. "I've seen

all three of them about town. Are ye satisfied?" No, Su?san saw with mounting

dis?may, she was not. "Do ye swear to me, Su?san—on your father's name—that

ye've not been meet'ing this boy Dear'born?"

All the rides in the late af'ter'noon, Su'san thought. All the ex'cus'es. All the care that

no one should see us. And it all comes down to a care'less wave on a rainy

morn'ing. That eas'ily all's put at risk. Did we think it could be oth'er'wise? Were we

that fool'ish?

Yes ... and no. The truth was they had been mad. And still were. Su'san kept

re'mem'ber'ing the look of her fa'ther's eyes on the few oc ca'sions when he had

caught her in a fib. That look of half-'cu'rious dis'ap point'ment. The sense that her

fib's, in'nocu'ous as they might be, had hurt him like the scratch of a thorn.

"I will swear to noth'ing," she said. "Ye've no right to ask it of me." "Swear!"

Cordelia cried shril'ly. She groped out for the ta'ble again and grasped it, as if for

bal'ance. "Swear it! Swear it! This is no game of jacks or tag or John'ny-'jump-'my-

pony! Thee's not a child any longer! Swear to me! Swear that thee're still pure!"

"No," Su'san said, and turned to leave. Her heart was beat'ing mad'ly, but still that

aw'ful clar'ity in'formed the world. Roland would have known it for what it was: she

was see'ing with gun'slinger's eyes. There was a glass win'dow in the kitchen,

look'ing out to'ward the Drop, and in it she saw the ghost'ly re'flec'tion of Aunt Cord

com'ing to'ward her, one arm raised, the hand at the end of it knot'ted in'to a fist.

With'out turn'ing, Su'san put up her own hand in a halt'ing ges'ture. "Raise that not to

me," she said. "Raise it not, ye bitch."

She saw the re'flec'tion's ghost-'eyes widen in shock and dis'may. She saw the ghost-

fist re'lax, be'come a hand again, fall to the ghost-'wom'an's side.

"Su'san," Cordelia said in a small, hurt voice. "How can ye call me so? What's so

coars'ened your tongue and your re'gard for me?"

Su'san went out with'out re'ply'ing. She crossed the yard and

en?tered the bam. Here

the smells she had known since child?hood—hors?es, lum ber, hay—filled her head

and drove the aw?ful clar?ity away. She was tum?bled back in? to child?hood, lost in the

shad?ows of her con?fu?sion again. Py?lon turned to look at her and whick?ered. Su?san

put her head against his neck and cried.

7

“There!” Sher?iff Av?ery said when sais Dear?born and Heath were gone. “It’s as ye

said—just slow is all they are; just creep?ing care?ful.” He held the metic?ulous?ly

print?ed list up, stud?ied it a mo?ment, then cack?led hap pi?ly. “And look at this! What

a beau?ty! Har! We can move any?thing we don’t want em to see days in ad?vance, so

we can.”

”They’re fools,” Reynolds said . . . but he pined for an?oth?er chance at them, just

the same. If Dear?born re?al?ly thought by?gones were by?gones over that lit?tle

busi?ness in the Trav?ellers’ Rest, he was way past fool?ish ness and dwelling in the

land of id?io?cy.

Deputy Dave said noth?ing. He was look?ing dis?con?so?late?ly through his mon?ocle at

the Cas?tles board, where his white army had been laid waste in six quick moves.

Jonas’s forces had poured around Red Hillock like wa?ter, and Dave’s hopes had

been swept away in the flood.

”I’m tempt?ed to wrap my?self up dry and go over to Seafront with this,” Av?ery said.

He was still gloat?ing over the pa?per, with its neat list of farms and ranch?es and

pro?posed dates of in?spec?tion. Up to Year’s End and be?yond it ran. Gods!

”Why don’t ye do that?” Jonas said, and got to his feet. Pain ran up his leg like

bit?ter light?ning.

”An?oth?er game, sai Jonas?” Dave asked, be?gin?ning to re?set the pieces.

”I’d rather play a weed?-eat?ing dog,” Jonas said, and took ma?li?cious plea?sure at the

flush that crept up Dave's neck and stained his guileless fool's face. He limped

across to the door, opened it, and went out on the porch. The drizzle had become a

soft, steady rain. Hill Street was deserted, the cobblestones gleaming wetly.

Reynolds had followed him out. "Eldred—"

"Get away," Jonas said without turning.

Clay hesitated a moment, then went back inside and closed the door.

What the hell's wrong with you? Jonas asked himself.

He should have been pleased at the two young pups and their list—as pleased as

Avory was, as pleased as Rimer would be when he heard about this morning's

visit. After all, hadn't he told Rimer not three days ago that the boys would soon

be over on the Drop, counting their little hearts out? Yes. So why did he feel so

unsettled? So fucking jittery? Because there ^Bt still hadn't been any contact

from Parson's man, Latiago? Because Reynolds came back empty from Hanging

Rock on one day and Depepe came back empty the next? Surely not. Latiago would

come, along with a goodly troop of men, but it was still too soon for them, and

Jonas knew it. Reaping was still almost a month away.

So is it just the bad weather working on your leg, stirring up that old wound and

making you ugly?

No. The pain was bad, but it had been worse before. The trouble was his head.

Jonas leaned against a post beneath the overhang, listened to the rain plinking on

the tiles, and thought how, sometimes in a game of Castles, a clever player would

peek around his Hillock for just a moment, then duck back. That was what this felt

like—it was so right it smelled wrong. Crazy idea, but somehow not crazy at all.

"Are you trying to play Castles with me, sprat?" Jonas murmured. "If so, you'll

soon wish you'd stayed home with your mommy. So you will."

Roland and Cuthbert headed back to the Bar K along the Drop—there would be no

counting done today. At first, in spite of the rain and the gray skies, Cuthbert's

good humor was almost entirely restored.

"Did you see them?" he asked with a laugh. "Did you see them, Roland . . . Will, I

mean? They bought it, didn't they? Swallowed that honey whole, they did!"

"Yes."

"What do we do next? What's our next move?"

Roland looked at him blankly for a moment, as if startled out of a doze. "The next

move is theirs. We count. And we wait."

Cuthbert's good cheer collapsed in a puff, and he once more found himself having

to restrain a flood of reclamation, all whirling around two basic ideas: that

Roland was shirking his duty so he could continue to wallow in the undeniable

charms of a certain young lady, and—more important—that Roland had lost his

wits when all of Mid-World needed them the most.

Except what duty was Roland shirking? And what made him so sure Roland was

wrong? Logic? Intuition? Or just shitty old catbox jealousy? Cuthbert found

himself thinking of the effortless way Jonas had ripped up Deputy Dave's army

when Deputy Dave had moved too soon. But life was not like Castles . . . was it?

He didn't know. But he thought he had at least one valid intuition: Roland was

heading for disaster. And so they all were.

Wake up, Cuthbert thought. Please, Roland, wake up before it's too late.

CHAPTER III

playing castles

1

There followed a week of the sort of weather that makes folk apt to crawl back

into bed after lunch, take long naps, and wake feeling stupid and disoriented. It

was far from flood-weather, but it made the final phase of the apple-picking

dan?ger?ous (there were sev?er?al bro?ken legs, and in Sev?en-
Mile Or?chard a young
wom?an fell from the top of her lad?der, break?ing her back),
and the pota?to-?fields
be?came dif?fi?cult to work; al?most as much time was spent
free?ing wag?ons stuck in
the gluey rows as was spent ac?tu?al?ly pick?ing. In Green
Heart, what dec?ora?tions
had been done for the Reap?ing Fair grew sod?den and had to
be pulled down. The
work vol?un?teers wait?ed with in?creas?ing ner?vous?ness for
the weath?er to break so
they could be?gin again.
It was bad weath?er for young men whose job it was to take in?
ven?to?ry, al?though
they were at least able to be?gin vis?it?ing barns and count?ing
stock. It was good
weath?er for a young man and young wom?an who had dis?cov?
ered the joys of
phys?ical love, you would have said, but Roland and Su?san met
on?ly twice dur?ing
the run of gray weath?er. The dan?ger of what they were do?ing
was now al?most
pal?pa?ble.
The first time was in an aban?doned boathouse on the Sea?coast
Road. The sec?ond
was in the far end of the crum?bling build?ing be?low and to the
east of Cit?go—they
made love with fu?ri?ous in?ten?si?ty on one of Roland's sad?
dle-?blan?kets, which was
spread on the floor of what had once been the oil re?fin?ery's
cafe?te?ria. As Su?san
cli?maxed, she shrieked his name over and over. Star?tled pi?
geons filled the old,
shad?owy rooms and crum?bling hall?ways with their soft thun?
der.

2

Just as it seemed that the driz?zle would nev?er end and the
grind?ing sound of the
thin?ny in the still air would drive ev?ery?one in Ham?bry in?
sane, a strong
wind—al?most a gale—blew in off the ocean and puffed the
clouds away. The
town awoke one day to a sky as bright as blue steel and a sun
that turned the bay

to gold in the morn?ing and white fire in the af?ter?noon. That sense of lethar?gy was

gone. In the pota?to fields the carts rolled with new vig?or. In Green Heart an army

of wom?en be?gan once more to be?deck with flow?ers the podi?um where Jamie

Mc?Cann and Su?san Del?ga?do would he ac?claimed this year's Reap?ing Lad and Girl.

Out on the part of the Drop clos?est to May?or's House, Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain

rode with re?newed pur?pose, count?ing the hors?es which ran with the Barony brand

on their flanks. The bright skies and brisk winds filled them with en?er?gy and good

cheer, and for a course of days—three, or per?haps four—they gal?loped to?geth?er in

a whoop?ing, shout?ing, laugh ing line, their old good fel?low?ship re?stored.

On one of these brisk and sun?ny days, El?dred Jonas stepped out of the Sher?iff's

of?fice and walked up Hill Street to?ward Green Heart. He was free of both De?pape

and Reynolds this morn?ing—they had rid?den out to Hang?ing Rock to?geth?er,

look?ing for Lati?go's out?rid?ers, who must come soon, now—and Jonas's plan was

sim?ple: to have a glass of beer in the pavil?ion, and watch the prepa?ra?tions that

were go?ing on there: the dig ging of the roast?ing-?pits, the lay?ing of fag?gots for the

bon?fire, the ar?gu ments over how to set the mor?tars that would shoot off the

fire?works, the ladies flow?er?ing the stage where this year's Lad and Girl would be

of?fered for the town's adu?la?tion. Per?haps, Jonas thought, he might take a like?ly-

look?ing flow?er-?girl off for an hour or two of recre?ation. The main?te?nance of the

sa?loon whores he left strict?ly to Roy and Clay, but a fresh young flow?er-?girl of

sev?en?teen or so was a dif?fer?ent mat?ter.

The pain in his hip had fad?ed with the damp weath?er; the painful, lurch?ing stride

with which he had moved for the last week or so had be come a mere limp again.

Per?haps just a beer or two in the open air would be enough,
but the thought of a
girl wouldn't quite leave his head. Young, clear-?skinned, high-?
breast?ed. Fresh,
sweet breath. Fresh, sweet lips—
“Mr. Jonas? El?dred?”

He turned, smil?ing, to the own?er of the voice. No dewy-?com?
plex?ioned flow?er-?girl

with wide eyes and moist, part?ed lips stood there, but a skin?ny
wom?an edg?ing in?to

late mid?dle age—flat chest, flat bum, tight pale lips, hair
scrooped so tight against

her skull that it fair screamed. On?ly the wide eyes cor?re?
spond?ed with his

day?dream. I be?lieve I've made a con quest, Jonas thought sar?
don?ical?ly.

“Why, Cordelia!” he said, reach?ing out and tak?ing one of her
hands in both of his.

“How love?ly you look this morn?ing!”

Thin col?or came up in her cheeks and she laughed a lit?tle. For
a mo ment she

looked forty-?five in?stead of six?ty. And she's not six?ty, Jonas
thought. The lines

around her mouth and the shad?ows un?der her eyes . . . those
are new.

“You're very kind,” she said, “but I know bet?ter. I haven't been
sleep ing, and

when wom?en my age don't sleep, they grow old rapid?ly.”

“I'm sor?ry to hear you're sleep?ing bad?ly,” he said. “But now
that the weath?er's

changed, per?haps—”

“It's not the weath?er. Might I speak to you, El?dred? I've
thought and thought, and

you're the on?ly one I dare turn to for ad?vice.”

His smile widened. He placed her hand through his arm, then
cov?ered it with his

own. Now her blush was like fire. With all that blood in her
head, she might talk

for hours. And Jonas had an idea that ev?ery word would be in?
ter?est?ing.

3

With wom?en of a cer?tain age and tem?per?ament, tea was
more ef?fec?tive than wine

when it came to loos?en?ing the tongue. Jonas gave up his plans
for a lager (and,

per?haps, a flow?er-?girl) with?out so much as a sec?ond thought. He seat?ed sai

Del?ga?do in a sun?ny com?er of the Green Heart pavil?ion (it was not far from a red

rock Roland and Su?san knew well), and or?dered a large pot of tea; cakes, too.

They watched the Reap?ing Fair prepa?ra?tions go for?ward as they wait?ed for the

food and drink. The sunswept park was full of ham?mer?ing and saw?ing and shouts

and bursts of laugh?ter.

“All Fair-?Days are pleas?ant, but Reap?ing turns us all in?to chil?dren again, don’t you

find?” Cordelia asked.

“Yes, in?deed,” said Jonas, who hadn’t felt like a child even when he had been one.

“What I still like best is the bon?fire,” she said, look?ing to?ward the great pile of

sticks and boards that was be?ing con?struct?ed at the far end of the park, eater-?cor?ner

from the stage. It looked like a large wood?en te?pee. “I love it when the towns?folk

bring their stuffy-?guys and throw them on. Bar?bar?ic, but it al?ways gives me such a

pleas?ant shiv?er.”

“Aye,” Jonas said, and won?dered if it would give her a pleas?ant shiv?er to know

that three of the stuffy-?guys thrown on?to the Reap Night bon?fire this year were apt

to smell like pork and scream like harpies as they burned. If his luck was in, the

one that screamed the longest would be the one with the pale blue eyes.

The tea and cakes came, and Jonas didn’t so much as glance at the girl’s full bo?som

when she bent to serve. He had eyes on?ly for the fas?ci nat?ing sai Del?ga?do, with her

ner?vous lit?tle shift?ing move?ments and odd, des?per?ate look.

When the girl was gone, he poured out, put the teapot back on its triv?et, then

cov?ered her hand with his. “Now, Cordelia,” he said in his warmest tone. “I can

see some?thing trou?bles you. Out with it. Con?fide in your friend El?dred.”

Her lips pressed so tightly together that they almost disappeared, but not even that

effort could stop their trembling. Her eyes filled with tears; swam with them;

overflowed. He took his napkin and, leaning across the table, wiped the tears

away.

"Tell me," he said tenderly.

"I will. I must tell somebody or go mad. But you must make one promise, Elfred."

"Of course, motherly." He saw her blush more furiously than ever at this harmless

engagement, and squeezed her hand. "Anything."

"You mustn't tell Hart. That disgusting spider of a Chancellor, either, but

especially not the Mayor. If I'm right in what I suspect and he found out, he could

send her west!" She almost moaned this, as if comprehending it as a real fact for

the first time. "He could send us both west!"

Maintaining his sympathetic smile, he said: "Not a word to Mayor Thorin, not a

word to Kimbairmer. Promise."

For a moment he thought that she wouldn't take the plunge ... or perhaps couldn't.

Then, in a low, gaspy voice that sounded like ripping cloth, she said a single word.

"Dearborn."

He felt his heart take a bump as the name that had been so much in his mind now

passed her lips, and although he continued to smile, he could not forbear a single

hard squeeze of her fingers that made her wince.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that you startled me a little. Dearborn ... a well-

spoken enough lad, but I wonder if he's entirely trustworthy."

"I fear he's been with my Susan." Now it was her turn to squeeze, but Jonas didn't

mind. He hardly felt it, in fact. He continued to smile, hoping he did not look as

flabbergasted as he felt. "I fear he's been with her ... as a man is with a woman. Oh,

how horrible this is!"

She wept with a silent bitterness, taking little pecking

peeks around as she did to

make sure they were not being observed. Jonas had seen coyotes and wild dogs

look around from their stinking dinners in just that fashion. He let her get as much

of it out of her system as he could—he wanted her calm; incoherencies wouldn't

help him—and when he saw her tears slackening, he held out a cup of tea. “Drink this.”

“Yes. Thank you.” The tea was still hot enough to steam, but she drank it down

greedily. Her old throat must be lined with slate, Jonas thought. She set the cup

down, and while he poured out fresh, she used her frilly panuelo to scrub the tears

almost viciously from her face.

“I don't like him,” she said. “Don't like him, don't trust him, none of those three

with their fancy In-World bows and insolent eyes and strange ways of talking, but

him in particular. Yet if anything's gone on betwixt the two of em (and I'm so

afraid it has), it comes back to her, doesn't it? It's the woman, after all, who must

refuse the bestial impulses.”

He leaned over the table, looking at her with warm sympathy. “Tell me

everything, Cordelia.”

She did.

4

Rhea loved everything about the glass ball, but what she especially loved was the

way it unfailingly showed her people at their vilest. Never in its pink reaches did

she see one child comforting another after a fall at play, or a tired husband with his

head in his wife's lap, or old people supping peacefully together at the end of the

day; these things held no more interest for the glass, it seemed, than they did for

her.

Instead she had seen acts of incest, mothers beating children, husbands beating

wives. She had seen a gang of boys out westwards of town (it

would have amused

Rhea to know these swag?ger?ing eight-?year-?olds called themselves the Big Cof?fin

Hunters) go about en?tic?ing stray dogs with a bone and then cut?ting off their tails

for a lark. She had seen rob berries, and at least one mur?der: a wan?der?ing man who

had stabbed his com?pan?ion with a pitch?fork af?ter some sort of triv?ial ar?gu?ment.

That had been on the first driz?zly night. The body still lay moul?der?ing in a ditch

be side the Great Road West, cov?ered with a lay?er of straw and weeds. It might be

dis?cov?ered be?fore the au?tumn storms came to drown another year; it might not.

She al?so glimpsed Cordelia Del?ga?do and that hard gun, Jonas, sit?ting in Green

Heart at one of the out?side ta?bles and talk?ing about . . . well, of course she didn't

know, did she? But she could see the look in the spin?ster bitch's eyes. In?fat?uated

with him, she was, all pink in the face. Gone all hot and sweet over a back?shoot?er

and failed gun?slinger. It was com?ical, aye, and Rhea thought she would keep an

eye on them, from time to time. Wery en?ter?tain?ing, it would like?ly be.

Af?ter show?ing her Cordelia and Jonas, the glass veiled it?self once more. Rhea put

it back in the box with the eye on the lock. See?ing Cordelia in the glass had

re?mind?ed the old wom?an that she had un?fin?ished busi?ness re?gard?ing Cordelia's

slut?tish niece. That Rhea still hadn't done that busi?ness was iron?ic but

un?der?stand?able—as soon as she had seen how to fix the young sai's wag?on, Rhea's

mind and emo?tions had set?tled again, the im?ages in the ball had reap?peared, and in

her fas?ci?na?tion with them Rhea had tem?porar?ily for?got?ten that Su?san Del?ga?do was

alive. Now, how ev?er, she re?mem?bered her plan. Set the cat among the pi?geons.

And speak ing of cats—

“Musty! Yoo-?hoo, Musty, where are ye?”

The cat came oil?ing out of the wood?pile, eyes glow?ing in the dirty dim?ness of the

hut (when the weath?er turned fine again, Rhea had pulled her shut?ters to), forked

tail wav?ing. He jumped in?to her lap.

“I’ve an er?rand for ye,” she said, bend?ing over to lick the cat. The en tranc?ing taste

of Musty’s fur filled her mouth and throat.

Musty purred and arched his back against her lips. For a six-?legged mu?tie cat, life

was good.

5

Jonas got rid of Cordelia as soon as he could—al?though not as soon as he would

have liked, be?cause he had to keep the scrawny bint sweet?ened up. She might

come in handy an?oth?er time. In the end he had kissed her on the com?er of her

mouth (which caused her to turn so vi?olent?ly red he feared she might have a brain-

storm) and told her that he would check in?to the mat?ter which so con?cerned her.

“But dis?creet?ly!” she said, alarmed.

Yes, he said, walk?ing her home, he would be dis?creet; dis?cre?tion was his mid?dle

name. He knew Cordelia wouldn’t—couldn’t—be eased un?til she knew for sure,

but he guessed it would turn out to be noth?ing but va por. Teenagers loved to

dra?ma?tize, didn’t they? And if the young lass saw that her aunt was afraid of

some?thing, she might well feed aun?tie’s fears in?stead of al?lay?ing them.

Cordelia had stopped by the white pick?et fence that di?vid?ed her gar?den-?plot from

the road, an ex?pres?sion of sub?lime re?lief com?ing over her face. Jonas thought she

looked like a mule hav?ing its back scratched with a stiff brush.

“Why, I nev?er thought of that... yet it’s like?ly, isn’t it?”

“Like?ly enough,” Jonas had said, “but I’ll still check in?to it most care ful?ly. Bet?ter

safe than sor?ry.” He kissed the com?er of her mouth again. “And not a word to the

fel?lows at Seafront. Not a hint.”

“Thank’ee, El?dred! Oh, thank’ee!” And she had hugged him be?

fore hurrying in, her

tiny breasts pressing like stones against the front of his shirt.

“Mayhap I’ll sleep

tonight, after all!”

She might, but Jonas wondered if he would.

He walked toward Hockley’s stable, where he kept his horse, with his head down

and his hands locked behind his back. A gaggle of boys came racing up the other

side of the street; two of them were waving severed dog’s tails with blood clotting

at the ends.

“Coffin Hunters! We’re Big Coffin Hunters just like you!” one called impatiently

across to him.

Jonas drew his gun and pointed it at them—it was done in a flash, and for a

moment the terrified boys saw him as he really was: with his eyes blazing and his

lips peeled back from his teeth, Jonas looked like a white-haired wolf in man’s

clothes.

“Get on, you little bastards!” he snarled. “Get on before I blow you loose of your

shoes and give your fathers cause to celebrate!”

For a moment they were frozen, and then they fled in a howling pack. One had left

his trophy behind; the dog’s tail lay on the board sidewalk like a grisly fan. Jonas

gripped at the sight of it, holstered his gun, locked his hands behind him again,

and walked on, looking like a parson meditating on the nature of the gods. And

what in gods’ name was he doing, pulling iron on a bunch of young hellions like

that?

Being upset, he thought. Being worried.

He was worried, all right. The timeless old bidding’s suspicions had upset him greatly.

Not on Thorin’s account—as far as Jonas was concerned, Dearborn could fuck the

girl in the town square at high noon of Reaping Fair Day—but because it

suggested that Dearborn might have fooled him about other things.

Crept up be?hind you once, he did, and you swore it 'd nev?er hap?pen again. But if

he's been did?dling that girl, it has hap?pened again. Hasn't it?

Aye, as they said in these parts. If the boy had had the im?per?ti?nence to be?gin an

af?fair with the May?or's gilly-?in-?wait?ing, and the in?cred?ible sly-?ness to get away

with it, what did that do to Jonas's pic?ture of three In-?World brats who could

bare?ly find their own be?hinds with both hands and a can?dle?

We un?der?es?ti?mat?ed em once and they made us look like mon?keys, Clay had said. I

don't want it to hap?pen again.

Had it hap?pened again? How much, re?al?ly, did Dear?born and his friends know?

How much had they found out? And who had they told? If Dear?born had been able

to get away with prong?ing the May?or's cho?sen ... to put some?thing that large over

on El?dred Jonas ... on ev?ery?one . . .

"Good day, sai Jonas," Bri?an Hookey said. He was grin?ning wide?ly, all but

kow?tow?ing be?fore Jonas with his som?brero crushed against his broad black?smith's

chest. "Would ye care for fresh graf, sai? I've just got?ten the new press?ing, and—"

"All I want is my horse," Jonas said curt?ly. "Bring it quick and stop your quack?ing."

"Aye, so I will, hap?py to oblige, thankee-?sai." He hur?ried off on the er?rand, tak?ing

one ner?vous, grin?ning look back over his shoul?der to make sure he wasn't go?ing to

be shot out of hand.

Ten min?utes lat?er Jonas was head?ed west on the Great Road. He felt a ridicu?lous

but nev?er?the?less strong de?sire to sim?ply kick his horse in? to a gal?lop and leave all

this fool?ish?ness be?hind him: Thorin the gray?ing goat-?boy, Roland and Su?sán with

their no-?doubt mawk?ish teenage love, Roy and Clay with their fast hands and slow

wits. Rimer with his am?bi?tions, Cordelia Del?ga?do with her ghastr?ly vi?sions of the

two of them in some bosky dell, him like?ly recit?ing po?et?ry

while she wove a

gar?land of flow?ers for his brow.

He had rid?den away from things be?fore, when in?tu?ition
whis?pered; plen?ty of

things. But there would be no rid?ing away this time. He had
vowed vengeance on

the brats, and while he had bro?ken a bushel of promis?es made
to oth?ers, he'd nev?er

bro?ken one made to him?self.

And there was John Far?son to con?sid?er. Jonas had nev?er
spo?ken to the Good Man

him?self (and nev?er want?ed to; Far?son was re?put?ed to be
whim sical?ly, dan?ger?ous?ly

in?sane), but he had had deal?ings with George Lati?go, who
would prob?ably be

lead?ing the troop of Far?son's men that would ar rive any day
now. It was Lati?go

who had hired the Big Cof?fin Hunters in the first place, pay?ing
a huge cash

ad?vance (which Jonas hadn't yet shared with Reynolds and De?
pape) and promis?ing

an even larg?er piece of war-?spoil if the Af?fil?ia?tion's ma?jor
forces were wiped out

in or around the Shaved Moun?tains.

Lati?go was a good-?sized bug, all right, but noth?ing to the size
of the bug trundling

along be?hind him. And be?sides, no large re?ward was ev?er
achieved with?out risk. If

they de?liv?ered the hors?es, ox?en, wag?ons of fresh veg?eta?
bles, the tack, the oil, the

glass—most of all the wiz?ard's glass—all would be well. If they
failed, it was very

like?ly that their heads would end up be?ing whacked about by
Far?son and his aides

in their night?ly po?lo games. It could hap?pen, and Jonas knew
it. No doubt some?day

it would hap?pen. But when his head fi?nal?ly part?ed com?pa?
ny from his shoul?ders,

the di?vorce wouldn't be caused by any such smarms as Dear?
born and his friends,

no mat?ter whose blood?line they had de?scend?ed from.

But if he's been hav?ing an af?fair with Thorin 's au?tumn treat .
. . if he's been able

to keep such a se?cret as that, what oth?ers has he been keep?
ing? Per?haps he is

play?ing Cas?tles with you.

If so, he wouldn't play for long. The first time young Mr. Dear?
born poked his nose
around his Hillock, Jonas would be there to shoot it off for him.

The ques?tion for the present was where to go first. Out to the
Bar K, to take a long

over?due look at the boys' liv?ing quar?ters? He could; they
would be count?ing

Barony hors?es on the Drop, all three of them. But it wasn't over
hors?es that he

might lose his head, was it? No, the hors?es were just a small
added at?trac?tion, as

far as the Good Man was con?cerned.

Jonas rode for Cit?go in?stead.

6

First he checked the tankers. They were just as had been and
should be— lined up

in a neat row with their new wheels ready to roll when the time
came, and hid?den

be?hind their new cam?ou?flage. Some of the screen?ing pine
branch?es were turn?ing

yel?low at the tips, but the re?cent spell of rain had kept most
ad?mirably fresh. There

had been no tam?per?ing that Jonas could see.

Next he climbed the hill, walk?ing be?side the pipeline and
paus?ing more and more

fre?quent?ly to rest; by the time he reached the rot?ting gate be?
tween the slope and

the oil?patch, his bad leg was pain?ing him severe?ly. He stud?
ied the gate, frown?ing

over the smudges he saw on the top rung. They might mean
noth?ing, but Jonas

thought some?one might have climbed over the gate rather than
risk open?ing it and

hav?ing it fall off its hinges.

He spent the next hour strolling around the der?ricks, pay?ing
espe cial?ly close

at?ten?tion to those that still worked, look?ing for sign. He
found plen?ty of tracks, but

it was im?pos?si?ble (es?pe?cial?ly af?ter a week of wet weath?
er) to read them with any

de?gree of ac?cu?ra?cy. The In-?World boys might have been
out here; that ug?ly lit?tle

band of brats from town might have been out here; Arthur Eld
and the whole

com?pa?ny of his knights might have been out here. The am?bi?gu?ity put Jonas in a

foul tem?per, as am?bi?gu?ity (oth?er than on a Cas?tles board) al?ways did.

He start?ed back the way he'd come, mean?ing to de?scend the slope to his horse and

ride back to town. His leg was aching like fury, and he want?ed a stiff drink to qui?et

it down. The bunkhouse at the Bar K could wait an?oth?er day.

He got halfway to the gate, saw the weedy spur track ty?ing Cit?go to the Great

Road, and sighed. There would be noth?ing on that lit?tle strip of road to see, but

now that he'd come all the way out here, he sup?posed he should fin?ish the job.

Bug?ger fin?ish?ing the job, I want a damned drink.

But Roland wasn't the on?ly one who some?times found his wish?es over?ruled by

train?ing. Jonas sighed, rubbed at his leg, then walked back to the weedy twin ruts.

Where, it seemed, there was some?thing to find af ter all.

It lay in the grassy ditch less than a dozen paces from the place where the old road

joined the Great Road. At first he saw on?ly a smooth white shape in the weeds and

thought it was a stone. Then he saw a black round-?ness that could on?ly be an

eye?hole. Not a stone, then; a skull.

Grunt?ing, Jonas knelt and fished it out while the few liv?ing der?ricks con?tinue?d to

squeal and thump be?hind him. A rook's skull. He had seen it be?fore. Hell, he

sus?pect?ed most of the town had. It be?longed to the showoff, Arthur Heath ... who,

like all showoffs, need?ed his lit?tle props.

"He called it the look?out," Jonas mur?mured. "Put it on the horn of his sad?dle

some?times, didn't he? And some?times wore it around his neck like a pen?dant."

Yes. The young?ster had been wear?ing it so that night in the Trav?ellers' Rest,

when—

Jonas turned the bird's skull. Some?thing rat?tled in?side like a last lone?ly thought.

Jonas tilt?ed it, shook it over his open palm, and a frag?ment of

gold chain dropped

out. That was how the boy had been wear?ing it. At some point the chain had

bro?ken, the skull had fall?en in the ditch, and sai Heath had nev?er trou?bled to go

look?ing for it. The thought that some?one might find it had prob?ably nev?er crossed

his mind. Boys were care?less. It was a won?der any ev?er grew up to be men.

Jonas's face re?mained calm as he knelt there ex?am?in?ing the bird's skull, but be?hind

the un?lined brow he was as fu?ri?ous as he had ev?er been in his life. They had been

out here, all right—it was an?oth?er thing he would have scoffed at just yes?ter?day.

He had to as?sume they had seen the tankers, cam?ou?flage or no cam?ou?flage, and if

not for the chance of find?ing this skull, he nev?er would have known for sure, one

way or the oth?er.

“When I fin?ish with em, their eye?sock?ets'll be as emp?ty as yours. Sir Rook. I'll

gouge em clean my?self.”

He start?ed to throw the skull away, then changed his mind. It might come in

handy. Car?ry?ing it in one hand, he start?ed back to where he'd left his horse.

7

Coral Thorin walked down High Street to?ward the Trav?ellers' Rest, her head

thump?ing rusti?ly and her heart sour in her breast. She had been up on?ly an hour,

but her hang?over was so mis?er?able it felt like a day al?ready. She was drink?ing too

much of late and she knew it—al?most ev?ery night now—but she was very care?ful

not to take more than one or two (and al ways light ones) where folks could see.

So far, she thought no one sus pect?ed. And as long as no one sus?pect?ed, she

sup?posed she would keep on. How else to bear her id?iot?ic broth?er? This id?iot?ic

town? And, of course, the knowl?edge that all of the ranch?ers in the Horse?men's

As?so?cia tion and at least half of the large landown?ers were

traitors? "Fuck the

Af fil?ia?tion," she whis?pered. "Bet?ter a bird in the hand."

But did she re?al?ly have a bird in the hand? Did any of them? Would 1-ar?son keep

his promis?es—promis?es made by a man named Lati?go and passed on by their own

inim?itable Kim?ba Rimer? Coral had her doubts; despots had such a con?ve?nient

way of for?get?ting their promis?es, and birds in the hand such an ir?ri?tat?ing way of

peck?ing your fin?gers, shit?ting in your palm, and then fly?ing away. Not that it

mat?tered now; she had made her bed. Be?sides, folks would al?ways want to drink

and gam?ble and rut, re gard?less of who they bowed their knees to or in whose

name their tax?es were col?lect?ed.

Still, when the voice of old de?mon con?science whis?pered, a few drinks helped to

still its lips.

She paused out?side Craven's Un?der?tak?ing Par?lor, look?ing up?street at the laugh?ing

boys on their lad?ders, hang?ing pa?per lanterns from high poles and build?ing eaves.

These gay lamps would be lit on the night of the Reap Fair, fill?ing Ham?bry's main

street with a hun?dred shades of soft, con?flict?ing light.

For a mo?ment Coral re?mem?bered the child she had been, look?ing at the col?ored

pa?per lanterns with won?der, lis?ten?ing to the shouts and the rat?tle of fire?works,

lis?ten?ing to the dance-?mu?sic com?ing from Green Heart as her fa?ther held her hand

. . . and, on his oth?er side, her big broth?er Hart's hand. In this mem?ory, Hart was

proud?ly wear?ing his first pair of long trousers.

Nos?tal?gia swept her, sweet at first, then bit?ter. The child had grown in?to a sal?low

wom?an who owned a sa?loon and whore?house (not to men tion a great deal of land

along the Drop), a wom?an whose on?ly sex?ual part?ner of late was her broth?er's

Chan?cel?lor, a wom?an whose chief goal up?on aris?ing these days was get?ting to the

hair of the dog that bit her as soon as pos?si?ble. How, ex?act?

ly, had things turned out

so? This wom?an whose eyes she used was the last wom?an the child she had been

would have ex?pect?ed to be?come.

“Where did I go wrong?” she asked her?self, and laughed. “Oh dear Man Je?sus,

where did this stray?ing sin?ner-?child go wrong? Can you say hal?lelu?jah.” She

sound?ed so much like the wan?der?ing preach?er-?wom?an that had come through town

the year be?fore—Pittston, her name had been, Sylvia Pittston—that she laughed

again, this time al?most nat?ural?ly. She walked on to?ward the Rest with a bet?ter will.

Sheemie was out?side, tend?ing to the re?mains of his silk?flow?ers. He waved to her

and called a greet?ing. She waved back and called some?thing in re?turn. A good

enough lad, Sheemie, and al?though she could have found an oth?er eas?ily enough,

she sup?posed she was glad De?pape hadn’t killed him.

The bar was al?most emp?ty but bril?liant?ly lit, all the gas-?jets flar?ing. It was clean, as

well. Sheemie would have emp?tied the spit?toons, but Coral guessed it was the

plump wom?an be?hind the bar who had done all the rest. The make?up couldn’t hide

the sal?low?ness of that wom?an’s cheeks, the hol?low-?ness of her eyes, or the way her

neck had start?ed to go all crepey (see?ing that sort of lizardy skin on a wom?an’s

neck al?ways made Coral shiv?er in?side).

It was Pet?tie the Trot?ter tend?ing bar be?neath The Romp’s stem glass gaze, and if

al?lowed to do so, she would con?tin?ue un?til Stan?ley ap?peared and ban?ished her.

Pet?tie had said noth?ing out loud to Coral—she knew bet?ter—but had made her

wants clear enough just the same. Her whor?ing days were al?most at an end. She

des?per?ate?ly de?sired to go to work tend?ing bar. There was prece?dent for it, Coral

knew—a fe?male bar?tender at For?est Trees in Pass o’ the Riv?er, and there had been

an?oth?er at Glen?cove, up the coast in Tavares, un?til she had

died of the pox. What

Pet?tie re?fused to see was that Stan?ley Ruiz was younger by fif?teen years and in far

bet?ter health. He would be pour?ing drinks un?der The Romp long af?ter Pet?tie was rot?ting (in?stead of Trot?ting) in a pau?per's grave.

"Good even, sai Thorin," Pet?tie said. And be?fore Coral could so much as open her

mouth, the whore had put a shot glass on the bar and filled it full of whiskey.

Coral looked at it with dis?may. Did they all know, then?

"I don't want that," she snapped. "Why in Eld's name would I? Sun isn't even

down! Pour it back in?to the bot?tle, for yer fa?ther's sake, and then get the hell out of

here. Who d'ye think yer serv?ing at five o' the clock, any?way? Ghosts?"

Pet?tie's face fell a foot; the heavy coat oth?er make?up ac?tu?al?ly seemed to crack

apart. She took the fun?nel from un?der the bar, stuck it in the neck of the bot?tle, and

poured the shot of whiskey back in. Some went on?to the bar in spite of the fun?nel;

her plump hands (now ring?less; her rings had been trad?ed for food at the

mer?can?tile across the street long since) were shak?ing. "I'm sor?ry, sai. So I am. I

was on?ly—"

"I don't care what ye was on?ly," Coral said, then turned a blood?shot eye on Sheb,

who had been sit?ting on his pi?ano-?bench and leaf?ing through old sheet-?mu?sic.

Now he was star?ing to?ward the bar with his mouth hung open. "And what are you

look?ing at, ye frog?"

"Noth?ing, sai Thorin. I—"

"Then go look at it some?where else. Take this pig with'ee. Give her a bounce, why

don't ye? It'll be good for her skin. It might even be good for yer own."

"I."

"Get out! Are ye deaf? Both of ye!"

Pet?tie and Sheb went away to?ward the kitchen in?stead of the cribs up stairs, but it

was all the same to Coral. They could go to hell as far as she was

concerned.

Any?where, as long as they were out of her aching face.

She went be?hind the bar and looked around. Two men play?ing cards over in the far

com?er. That hard?case Reynolds was watch?ing them and sip?ing a beer. There was

an?oth?er man at the far end of the bar, but he was star?ing off in?to space, lost in his

own world. No one was pay?ing any espe cial at?ten?tion to sai Coral Thorin, and

what did it mat?ter if they were? If Pet?tie knew, they all knew.

She ran her fin?ger through the pud?dle of whiskey on the bar, sucked it, ran it

through again, sucked it again. She grasped the bot?tle, but be?fore she could pour, a

spi?dery mon?stros?ity with gray-?green eyes leaped, hiss ing, on?to the bar. Coral

shrieked and stepped back, drop?ping the whiskey bot?tle be?tween her feet . . .

where, for a won?der, it didn't break. For a mo ment she thought her head would

break, in?stead—that her swelling, throbb?ing brain would sim?ply split her skull like

a rot?ten eggshell. There was a crash as the card-?play?ers over?turned their ta?ble

get?ting up. Rey nolds had drawn his gun.

“Nay,” she said in a qua?ver?ing voice she could hard?ly rec?og?nize. Her eye?balls

were puls?ing and her heart was rac?ing. Peo?ple could die of fright, she re?al?ized that

now. “Nay, gen?tle?men, all's well.”

The six-?legged freak stand?ing on the bar opened its mouth, bared its nee?dle fangs,

and hissed again.

Coral bent down (and as her head passed be?low the lev?el of her waist, she was

once more sure it was go?ing to ex?plode), picked up the bot?tle, saw that it was still

a quar?ter full, and drank di?rect?ly from the neck, no longer car?ing who saw her do it

or what they thought.

As if hear?ing her thought, Musty hissed again. He was wear?ing a red col?lar this

af?ter?noon—on him it looked bale?ful rather than jaun?ty. Be neath it was tucked a

white scrap of paper.

"Want me to shoot it?" a voice drawled. "I will if you like. One slug and won't be noth'ing left but claws." It was Jonas, stand'ing just in'side the batwings, and al'though he looked not a whole lot bet'ter than she felt, Coral had no doubt he could do it.

"Nay. The old bitch'll turn us all in'to lo'custs, or some'thing like, if ye kill her fa'mil'iar."

"What bitch?" Jonas asked, cross'ing the room.

"Rhea Du'ba'ti'vo. Rhea of the Coos, she's called."

"Ah! Not the bitch but the witch."

"She's both."

Jonas stroked the cat's back. It al'lowed it'self to be pet'ted, even arch ing against his hand, but he on'ly gave it the sin'gle ca'ress. Its fur had an un'pleasant damp feel.

"Would you con'sid'er shar'ing that?" he asked, nod'ding to'ward the bot'tle. "It's

ear'ly, but my leg hurts like a dev'il sick of sin."

"Your leg, my head, ear'ly or late. On the house."

Jonas raised his white eye'brows.

"Count yer bless'ings and have at it, cul'ly."

She reached to'ward Musty. He hissed again, but al'lowed her to draw the note out

from un'der his col'lar. She opened it and read the five words that were print'ed there:

"Might I see?" Jonas asked. With the first drink down and warm'ing his bel'ly, the world looked bet'ter.

"Why not?" She hand'ed him the note. Jonas looked, then hand'ed it back. He had

al'most for'got'ten Rhea, and that wouldn't have done at all. Ah, but it was hard to

re'mem'ber ev'ery'thing, wasn't it? Just late'ly Jonas felt less like a hired gun than a

cook try'ing to make all nine cours'es of a state din'ner come out at the same time.

Luck'ily, the old hag had re'mind'ed him of her pres'ence her'self. Gods bless her

thirst. And his own, since it had land'ed him here at the right time.

"Sheemie!" Coral bawled. She could al?so feel the whiskey work?ing; she felt

al?most hu?man again. She even won?dered if El?dred Jonas might be in?ter?est?ed in a

dirty evening with the May?or's sis?ter ... who knew what might speed the hours?

Sheemie came in through the batwings, hands grimy, pink som?br?era bounc?ing on

his back at the end of its cuer?da. "Aye, Coral Thorin! Here I be!"

She looked past him, cal?cu?lat?ing the sky. Not tonight, not even for Rhea; she

wouldn't send Sheemie up there af?ter dark, and that was the end of it.

"Noth?ing," she said in a voice that was gen?tler than usu?al. "Go back to yer flow?ers,

and see that ye cov?er them well. It bids frosty."

She turned over Rhea's note and scrawled a sin?gle word on it: to?mor?row

This she fold?ed and hand?ed to Jonas. "Stick it un?der that stink's col?lar for me, will

ye? I don't want to touch him."

Jonas did as he was asked. The cat fa?vored them with a fi?nal wild green look, then

leaped from the bar and van?ished be?neath the batwings.

"Time is short," Coral said. She hadn't the slight?est idea what she meant, but Jonas

nod?ded in what ap?peared to be per?fect un?der?stand?ing. "Would you care to go

up?stairs with a clos?et drunk? I'm not much in the looks de?part?ment, but I can still

spread em all the way to the edge of the bed, and I don't just lie there."

He con?sidered, then nod?ded. His eyes were gleam?ing. This one was as thin as

Cordelia Del?ga?do ... but what a dif?fer?ence, eh? What a dif?fer ence! "All right."

"I've been known to say some nasty things—fair warn?ing."

"Dear la?dy, I shall be all ears."

She smiled. Her headache was gone. "Aye. I'll just bet ye will."

"Give me a minute. Don't move a step." He walked across to where Reynolds sat.

"Drag up a chair, El?dred."

"I think not. There's a la?dy wait?ing."

Reynolds's gaze flicked briefly to?ward the bar. "You're jok?

ing.”

“I nev?er joke about wom?en, Clay. Now mark me.”

Reynolds sat for?ward, eyes in?tent. Jonas was grate?ful this wasn’t De?pape. Roy

would do what you asked, and usu?al?ly well enough, but on?ly af?ter you’d ex?plained

it to him half a dozen times.

“Go to Lengyll,” he said. “Tell him we want to put about a dozen men—no less

than ten—out at yon oil?patch. Good men who can get their heads down and keep

them down and not snap the trap too soon on an am?bush, if am?bush?ing’s re?quired.

Tell him Bri?an Hock?ey’s to be in charge. He’s got a lev?el head, which is more than

can be said for most of these poor things.”

Reynolds’s eyes were hot and hap?py. “You ex?pect the brats?”

“They’ve been out there once, may?hap they’ll be out again. If so, they’re to be

cross?fired and knocked down dead. At once and with no warn?ing. You

un?der?stand?”

“Yar! And the tale af?ter?”

“Why, that the oil and the tankers must have been their busi?ness,” Jonas said with

a crooked smile. “To be tak?en to Far?son, at their com mand and by con?fed?er?ates

un?known. We’ll be car?ried through the streets on the town’s shoul?ders, come Reap.

Hailed as the men who root?ed out the traitors. Where’s Roy?”

“Gone back to Hang?ing Rock. I saw him at noon. He says they’re com?ing, El?dred;

says when the wind swings in?to the east, he can hear ap proach?ing horse.”

“Maybe he on?ly hears what he wants to hear.” But he sus?pect?ed De?pape was right.

Jonas’s mood, at rock bot?tom when he stepped in?to the Trav?ellers’ Rest, was now

very much on the re?bound.

“We’ll start mov?ing the tankers soon, whether the brats come or not. At night, and

two by two, like the an?imals go?ing on board Old Pa’s Ark.” He laughed at this.

“But we’ll leave some, eh? Like cheese in a trap.”

“Sup?pose the mice don’t come?”

Jonas shrugged. "If not one way, another. I intend to press them a little more

tomorrow. I want them angry, and I want them confused. Now go on about your

business. I have your lady waiting."

"Better you than me, Elfred."

Jonas nodded. He guessed that half an hour from now, he would have forgotten all

about his aching leg. "That's right," he said. "You should eat like fudge."

He walked back to the bar, where Coral stood with her arms folded. Now she

unfolded them and took his hands. The right she put on her left breast. The nipple

was hard and erect under his fingers. The forefinger of his left hand she put in her

mouth, and bit down lightly.

"Shall we bring the bottle?" Jonas asked.

"Why not?" said Coral Thorin.

8

If she'd gone to sleep as drunk as had been her habit over the last few months, the

creak of the bedsprings wouldn't have awakened her—a bomb-blast wouldn't have

awakened her. But although they'd brought the bottle, it still stood on the night-

table of the bedroom she maintained at the Rest (it was as big as any three of the

whores' cribs put together), the level of the whiskey unchanged. She felt sore all

over her body, but her head was clear; sex was good for that much, anyway.

Jonas was at the window, looking out at the first gray traces of daylight and

pulling his pants up. His bare back was covered with crisscrossed scars. She

thought to ask him who had administered such a savage flogging and how he'd

survived it, then decided she'd do better to keep quiet.

"Where are ye off to?" she asked.

"I believe I'm going to start by finding some paint—any shade will do—and a

street-mutt still in possession of its tail. After that, said, I don't think you want to

know."

“Very well.” She lay down and pulled the covers up to her chin.

She felt she could
sleep for a week.

Jonas yanked on his boots and went to the door, buckling his
gunbelt. He paused

with his hand on the knob. She looked at him, grayish eyes al-
ready half-filled

with sleep again.

“I’ve never had better,” Jonas said.

Coral smiled. “No, really,” she said. “Nor I.”

CHAPTER IV

Roland AND Cuthbert

1

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out onto the porch of the
Bar K bunkhouse

almost two hours after Jonas had left Coral’s room at the Trav-
ellers’ Rest. By then

the sun was well up over the horizon. They weren’t late risers
by nature, but as

Cuthbert put it, “We have a certain In-World image to
maintain. Not laziness but

lounginess.”

Roland stretched, arms spread toward the sky in a wide Y, then
bent and grasped

the toes of his boots. This caused his back to crackle.

“I hate that noise,” Alain said. He sounded more and sleepier.
In fact, he had been

troubled by odd dreams and premonitions all night—things
which, of the three of

them, only he was prey to. Because of the touch, perhaps—
with him it had always

been strong.

“That’s why he does it,” Cuthbert said, then clapped Alain on
the shoulder. “Cheer

up, old boy. You’re too handsome to be downhearted.”

Roland straightened, and they walked across the dusty yard to-
ward the stables.

Halfway there, he came to a stop so sudden that Alain almost
ran into his back.

Roland was looking east. “Oh,” he said in a funny, bemused
voice. He even

smiled a little.

“Oh?” Cuthbert echoed. “Oh what, great leader? Oh joy, I
shall see the perfumed

lady anon, or oh rats, I must work with my smelly male com-

pan?ions all the

live?long day?"

Alain looked down at his boots, new and un?com?fort?able when they had left

Gilead, now sprung, trail?worn, a lit?tle down at the heels, and as com?fort?able as

work?boots ev?er got. Look?ing at them was bet?ter than look ing at his friends, for

the time be?ing. There was al?ways an edge to Cuth?bert's teas? ing these days; the old

sense of fun had been re?placed by some?thing that was mean and un?pleas?ant. Alain

kept ex?pect?ing Roland to flash up at one of Cuth?bert's jibes, like steel that has

been struck by sharp flint, and knock Bert sprawl?ing. In a way, Alain al?most

wished for it. It might clear the air.

But not the air of this morn?ing.

"Just oh," Roland said mild?ly, and walked on.

"Cry your par?don, for I know you'll not want to hear it, but I'd speak a fur?ther

word about the pi?geons," Cuth?bert said as they sad?dled their mounts. "I still

be?lieve that a mes?sage—"

"I'll make you a promise," Roland said, smil?ing.

Cuth?bert looked at him with some mis?trust. "Aye?"

"If you still want to send by flight to?mor?row morn?ing, we'll do so. The one you

choose shall be sent west to Gilead with a mes?sage of your de? vis?ing band?ed to its

leg. What do you say, Arthur Heath? Is it fair?"

Cuth?bert looked at him for a mo?ment with a sus?pi?cion that hurt Alain's heart. Then

he al?so smiled. "Fair," he said. "Thank you."

And then Roland said some?thing which struck Alain as odd and made that

pre?scient part of him quiver with dis?qui?et. "Don't thank me yet."

2

"I don't want to go up there, sai Thorin," Sheemie said. An un? usu?al ex pres?sion

had creased his nor?mal?ly smooth face—a trou?bled and fear? ful frown. "She's a

scary la?dy. Scary as a beary, she is. Got a wart on her nose, right here." He

thumbed the tip of his own nose, which was small and smooth and well mold?ed.

Coral, who might have bit?ten his head off for such hes?ita?tion on?ly yes?ter?day, was

un?usu?al?ly pa?tient to?day. "So true," she said. "But Sheemie, she asked for ye

spe?cial, and she tips. Ye know she does, and well."

"Won't help if she turns me in?to a bee?tle," Sheemie said mo?rose?ly. "Bee?tles can't

spend cop?pers."

Nev?er?the?less, he let him?self be led to where Capri?choso, the inn's pack-?mule, was

tied. Barkie had load?ed two small tuns over the mule's back. One, filled with sand,

was just there for bal?ance. The oth?er held a fresh press?ing of the graf Rhea had a

taste for.

"Fair-?Day's com?ing," Coral said bright?ly. "Why, it's not three weeks now."

"Aye." Sheemie looked hap?pi?er at this. He loved Fair-?Days pas?sion ate?ly—the

lights, the fire?crack?ers, the danc?ing, the games, the laugh?ter. When Fair-?Day came,

ev?ery?one was hap?py and no one spoke mean.

"A young man with cop?pers in his pock?et is sure to have a good time at the Fair,"

Coral said.

"That's true, sai Thorin." Sheemie looked like some?one who has just dis?cov?ered

one of life's great prin?ci?ples. "Aye, truey-?true, so it is."

Coral put Capri?choso's rope hal?ter in?to Sheemie's palm and closed the fin?gers over

it. "Have a nice trip, lad. Be po?lite to the old crow, bow yer best bow . . . and make

sure ye're back down the hill be?fore dark."

"Long be?fore, aye," Sheemie said, shiv?er?ing at the very thought of still be?ing up in

the Coos af?ter night?fall. "Long be?fore, sure as loaves 'n fish?es."

"Good lad." Coral watched him off, his pink som?brero now clapped on his head,

lead?ing the grumpy old pack-?mule by its rope. And, as he dis ap?peared over the

brow of the first mild hill, she said it again: "Good lad."

Jonas wait?ed on the flank of a ridge, bel?ly-?down in the tall grass, un?til the brats

were an hour gone from the Bar K. He then rode to the ridgetop and picked them

out, three dots four miles away on the brown slope. Off to do their dai?ly du?ty. No

sign they sus?pect?ed any?thing. They were smarter than he had at first giv?en them

cred?it for ... but nowhere near as smart as they thought they were.

He rode to with?in a quar?ter mile of the Bar K—ex?cept for the bunk-?house and

sta?ble, a burned-?out hulk in the bright sun?light of this ear?ly au?tumn day—and

teth?ered his horse in a copse of cot?ton?woods that grew around the ranch house

spring. Here the boys had left some wash?ing to dry. Jonas stripped the pants and

shirts off the low branch?es up?on which they had been hung, made a pile of them,

pissed on them, and then went back to his horse.

The an?imal stamped the ground em?phat?ical?ly when Jonas pulled the dog's tail

from one of his sad?dle?bags, as if say?ing he was glad to be rid of it. Jonas would be

glad to be rid of it, too. It had be?gun giv?ing off an un mis?tak?able aro?ma. From the

oth?er sad?dle?bag he took a small glass jar of red paint, and a brush. These he had

ob?tained from Bri?an Hock?ey's el?dest son, who was mind?ing the liv?ery sta?ble

to?day. Sai Hookey him?self would be out to Cit?go by now, no doubt.

Jonas walked to the bunkhouse with no ef?fort at con?ceal?ment ... not that there

was much in the way of con?ceal?ment to be had out here. And no one to hide from,

any?way, now that the boys were gone.

One of them had left an ac?tual book— Mer?cer's Hom?ilies and Medi?ta tions- on the

seat of a rock?ing chair on the porch. Books were things of exquisite rar?ity in Mid-

World, es?pe?cial?ly as one trav?elled out from the cen?ter. This was the first one,

ex?cept for the few kept in Seafront, that Jonas had seen since

com?ing to Mejis. He

opened it. In a firm wom?an's hand he read: To my dear?est son,
from his lov?ing

MOTH?ER. Jonas tore j (Ins page out, opened his jar of paint,
and dipped the tips

of his last two fingers in?side. He blot?ted out the word MOTH?
ER with the pad of

his third linger, then, us?ing the nail of his pinky as a makeshift
pen, print?ed CUNT

above MOTH?ER. He poked this sheet on a rusty nail?head
where it was sure to be

seen, then tore the book up and stamped on the pieces. Which
boy had it be?longed

to? He hoped it was Dear?born's, but it didn't re?al?ly mat?ter.

The first thing Jonas no?ticed when he went in?side was the pi?
geons, coo?ing in their

cages. He had thought they might be us?ing a he?lio to send
(heir mes?sages, but

pi?geons! My! That was ev?er so much more trig!

"I'll get to you in a few min?utes," he said. "Be pa?tient, dar?
lings; peck and shit

while you still can."

He looked around with some cu?rios?ity, the soft coo of the pi?
geons sooth?ing in his

ears. Lads or lords? Roy had asked the old man in Ritzy. The old
man had said

maybe both. Neat lads, at the very least, from the way they kept
their quar?ters,

Jonas thought. Well trained. Three bunks, all made. Three piles
of goods at the

foot of each, stacked up just as neat. In each pile he found a pic?
ture of a

moth?er—oh, such good fel?lows they were—and in one he
found a pic?ture of both

par?ents. He had hoped for names, pos?si?bly doc?uments of
some kind (even love

let?ters from the girl, may?hap), but there was noth?ing like
that. Lads or lords, they

were care?ful enough. Jonas re?moved the pic?tures from their
frames and shred?ded

them. The goods he scat?tered to all points of the com?pass, de?
stroy?ing as much as

he could in the lim?it?ed time he had. When he found a linen
hand?ker?chief in the

pock?et of a pair of dress pants, he blew his nose on it and then

spread it care?ful?ly

on the toes of the boy's dress boots, so that the green splat would show to good

ad?van?tage. What could be more ag?gra?vat?ing— more un?set?tling—than to come

home af?ter a hard day spent tal?ly?ing stock and find some stranger's snot on one of

your per?son?als?

The pi?geons were up?set now; they were in?ca?pable of scold?ing like jays or rooks,

but they tried to flut?ter away from him when he opened their cages. It did no good,

of course. He caught them one by one and twist?ed their heads off. That much

ac?com?plished, Jonas popped one bird be?neath the strawtick pil?low of each boy.

Be?neath one of these pil?lows he found a small bonus: pa?per strips and a stor?age-

pen, un?doubt?ed?ly kept for the com?po?si?tion of mes?sages. He broke the pen and

flung it across the room. The strips he put in his own pock?et. Pa?per al?ways came

in handy.

With the pi?geons seen to, he could hear bet?ter. He be?gan walk?ing slow?ly back and

forth on the board floor, head cocked, lis?ten?ing.

4

When Alain came rid?ing up to him at a gal?lop, Roland ig?nored the boy's strained

white face and burn?ing, fright?ened eyes. "I make it thir?ty?-one on my side," he said,

"all with the Barony brand, crown and shield. You?"

"We have to go back," Alain said. "Some?thing's wrong. It's the touch. I've nev?er

felt it so clear."

"Your count?" Roland asked again. There were times, such as now, when he found

Alain's abil?ity to use the touch more an?noy?ing than help?ful.

"Forty. Or forty?-one, I for?get. And what does it mat?ter? They've moved what they

don't want us to count. Roland, didn't you hear me? We have to go back!

Some?thing's wrong! Some?thing's wrong at our place /"

Roland glanced to?ward Bert, rid?ing peace?ably some five hun?dred yards away.

Then he looked back at Alain, his eyebrows raised in a silent question.

"Bert? He's numb to the touch and always has been—you know it. I'm not. You

know I'm not! Roland, please! Whoever it is will see the pigeons! Maybe find our

guns!" The normally phlegmatic Alain was nearly crying in his excitement and

dismay. "If you won't go back with me, give me leave to go back by myself! Give

me leave, Roland, for your father's sake!"

"For your father's sake, I give you none," Roland said. "My count is thirty-one.

Yours is forty. Yes, we'll say forty. Forty's a good number—good as any, I wot.

Now we'll change sides and count again."

"What's wrong with you?" Alain almost whispered. He was looking at Roland as if

Roland had gone mad.

"Nothing."

"You knew! You knew when we left this morning!"

"Oh, I might have seen something," Roland said. "A reflection, perhaps, but ... do

you trust me, Al? That's what matters, I think. Do you trust me, or do you think I

lost my wits when I lost my heart? As he does?" He jerked his head in Cuthbert's

direction. Roland was looking at Alain with a faint smile on his lips, but his eyes

were ruthless and distant it was Roland's over-the-horizon look. Alain wondered if

Susan Delgado had seen that expression yet, and if she had, what she made of it.

"I trust you." By now Alain was so confused that he didn't know for Mire if that

was a lie or the truth.

"Good. Then switch sides with me. My count is thirty-one, mind."

"Thirty-one," Alain agreed. He raised his hands, then dropped them back to his

thighs with a slap so sharp his normally stolid mount laid his ears back and jiggled

a bit under him. "Thirty-one."

"I think we may go back early today, if that's any satisfaction to you," Roland said,

and rode away. Alain watched him. He'd al?ways won?dered what went on in

Roland's head, but nev?er more than now.

5

Creak. Creak-?creak.

Here was what he'd been lis?ten?ing for, and just as Jonas was about to give up the

hunt. He had ex?pect?ed to find their hidey-?hole a lit?tle clos?er to their beds, but they

were trig, all right.

He went to one knee and used the blade of his knife to pry up the board which had

creaked. Un?der it were three bun?dles, each swad?dled in dark strips of cot?ton cloth.

These strips were damp to the touch and smelled fra?grant?ly of gun-?oil. Jonas took

the bun?dles out and un?wrapped each, cu?ri?ous to see what sort of cal?ibers the

young?sters had brought. The an?swer turned out to be ser?vice?able but

undis?tin?guished. Two of the bun dles con?tained sin?gle five-?shot re?volvers of a

type then called (for no rea son I know) "carvers." The third con?tained two guns,

six-?shoot?ers of high?er qual?ity than the carvers. In fact, for one heart-?stop?ping

mo?ment, Jonas thought he had found the big re?volvers of a gun?slinger—true-?blue

steel bar?rels, san?dal?wood grips, bores like mi?ne?shafts. Such guns he could not

have left, no mat?ter what the cost to his plans. See?ing the plain grips was thus

some?thing of a re?lief. Dis?ap?point?ment was nev?er a thing you looked for, but it had

a won?der?ful way of clear?ing the mind.

He rewrapped the guns and put them back, put the board back as well. A gang of

ne'er-?do-?well clots from town might pos?si?bly come out here, and might pos?si?bly

van?dal?ize the un?guard?ed bunkhouse, scat?ter?ing what they didn't tear up, but find a

hid?ing place such as this? No, my son. Not like?ly.

Do you re?al?ly think they'll be?lieve it was hooli?gans from town that did this?

They might; just be?cause he had un?der?es?ti?mat?ed them to

start with didn't mean he

should turn about-face and begin overestimating them
now. And he had the luxury

of not needing to care. Either way, it would make them an-
gry. Angry enough to

rush full-tilt around their Hillock, perhaps. To throw caution
to the wind . . . and

reap the whirlwind.

Jonas poked the end of the severed dog's tail into one of the
pigpen-cages, so it

stuck up like a huge, mocking feather. He used the paint to
write such charmingly

boyish slogans as

and

on the walls. Then he left, standing on the porch for a moment
to verify he still

had the Bar K to himself. Of course he did. Yet for a blink or
two, there at the end,

he'd felt uneasy—almost as though he'd been sensed. By
some sort of In-World

telepathy, maybe.

There is such; you know it. The touch, it's called.

Aye, but that was the tool of gunslingers, artists, and lunatics.
Not of boys, be they

lords or just lads.

Jonas went back to his horse at a near-trot nevertheless,
mounted, and rode toward

town. Things were reaching the boil, and there would be a lot
to do before De-mon

Moon rose full in the sky.

6

Rhea's hut, its stone walls and the cracked gutter of its roof
slimed with moss,

huddled on the last hill of the Coos. Beyond it was a magnificent
view

northwest—the Bad Grass, the desert, Hanging Rock, Eyebolt
Canyon—but

scenic vistas were the last thing on Sheemie's mind as he led
Capriccioso

cautiously into Rhea's yard not long after noon. He'd been
hungry for the last hour

or so, but now the pangs were gone. He hated this place worse
than any other in

Barony, even more than Citgo with its big towers always go-
ing creaky-creak

and clangety-clang.

“Sai?” he called, leading the mule into the yard. Capi balked as they neared the

hut, planting his feet and lowering his neck, but when Sheemie tugged the halter,

he came on again. Sheemie was almost sorry.

“Ma’am? Nice old lady that wouldn’t hurt a fly? You therey-air? It’s good old

Sheemie with your graf.” He smiled and held out his free hand, palm up, to

demonstrate his exquisite harmlessness, but from the hut there was still no

response. Sheemie felt his guts first coil, then cramp. For a moment he thought he

was going to shit in his pants just like a baby; then he passed wind and felt a little

better. In his bowels, at least.

He walked on, liking this less at every step. The yard was rocky and the straggling

weeds yellowish, as if the hut’s resident had blighted the very earth with her touch.

There was a garden, and Sheemie saw that the vegetables still in it—pumpkins and

sharp-root, mostly—were mummies. Then he noticed the garden’s stuffy-guy. It was

also a mummy, a nasty thing with two straw heads instead of one and what appeared

to be a stuffed hand in a woman’s satin glove poking out of the chest area.

Sai Thorin’ll never talk me up here again, he thought. Not for all the pennies in the

world.

The hut’s door stood open. To Sheemie it looked like a gaping mouth. A sickish

dank smell drifted out.

Sheemie stopped about fifteen paces from the house, and when Capi nuzzled his

bottom (as if to ask what was keeping them), the boy uttered a brief screech. The

sound of it almost set him running, and it was only by exercising all his willpower

that he was able to stand his ground. The day was bright, but up here on this hill,

the sun seemed meaningless. This wasn’t his first trip up here, and Rhea’s hill had

nev?er been pleas?ant, but it was some?how worse now. It made him feel the way the

sound of the thin?ny made him feel when he woke and heard it in the mid?dle of the

night. As if some?thing aw?ful was slid?ing to?ward him—some?thing that was all

in?sane eyes and red, reach?ing claws.

“S?-S?-Sai? Is any?one here? Is—”

“Come clos?er.” The voice drift?ed out of the open door. “Come to where I can see

you, id?iot boy.”

Try?ing not to moan or cry, Sheemie did as the voice said. He had an idea that he

was nev?er go?ing back down the hill again. Capric?cioso, perhaps, but not him.

Poor old Sheemie was go?ing to end up in the cookpot—hot dinner tonight, soup

to?mor?row, cold snacks un?til Year’s End. That’s what he would be.

He made his re?luc?tant way to Rhea’s stoop on rub?bery legs—if his knees had been

clos?er to?geth?er, they would have knocked like cas?tanets. She didn’t even sound the same.

“S?-Sai? I’m afraid. So I a?-a?-am.”

“So ye should be,” the voice said. It drift?ed and drift?ed, slipping out in?to the

sun?light like a sick puff of smoke. “Nev?er mind, though—just do as I say. Come

clos?er, Sheemie, son of Stanley.”

Sheemie did so, al?though ter?ror dragged at ev?ery step he took. The mule fol?lowed,

head down. Capi had honked like a goose all the way up here—honked

cease?less?ly—but now he had fall?en silent.

“So here ye be,” the voice buried in those shad?ows whis?pered. “Here ye be,

in?deed.”

She stepped in?to the sun?light falling through the open door, winc?ing for a mo?ment

as it daz?zled her eyes. Clapsed in her arms was the emp?ty graf bar?rel. Coiled

around her throat like a neck?lace was Er?mot.

Sheemie had seen the snake be?fore, and on pre?vi?ous oc?ca?sions had nev?er failed to

won?der what sort of ag?onies he might suf?fer be?fore he died
if he hap?pened to be

bit?ten by such. To?day he had no such thoughts. Com pared to
Rhea, Er?mot looked

nor?mal. The old wom?an's face had sunken at the cheeks, giv?
ing the rest of her

head the look of a skull. Brown spots swarmed out of her thin
hair and over her

bulging brow like an army of in?vad?ing in?sects. Be?low her
left eye was an open

sore, and her grin showed on?ly a few re?main?ing teeth.

"Don't like the way I look, do'ee?" she asked. "Makes yer heart
cold, don't it?"

"N-?No," Sheemie said, and then, be?cause that didn't sound
right: "I mean yes!" But

gods, that sound?ed even worse. "You're beau?ti?ful, sai!" he
blurt?ed.

She chuffed near?ly sound?less laugh?ter and thrust the emp?ty
tun in?to his arms

al?most hard enough to knock him on his ass. The touch of her
fin?gers was brief,

but long enough to make his flesh crawl.

"Well-?a-day. They say hand?some is as hand?some does, don't
they?"

And that suits me. Aye, right down to the ground. Bring me my
graf, id?iot child."

"Y-?yes, sai! Right away, sai!" He took the emp?ty tun back to
the mule, set it down,

then fum?bled loose the cordage hold?ing the lit?tle bar?rel of
graf. He was very aware

of her watch?ing him, and it made him clum?sy, hut fi?nal?ly he
got the bar?rel loose. It

al?most slid through his grasp, and there was a night?mar?ish
mo?ment when he

thought it would fall to the stony ground and smash, but he
caught his grip again at

the last sec?ond. He took it to her, had just a sec?ond to re?al?
ize she was no longer

wear?ing the snake, then felt it crawl?ing on his boots. Er?mot
looked up at him,

hiss ing and bar?ing a dou?ble set of fangs in an eerie grin.

"Don't move too fast, my boy. 'Twouldn't be wise—Er?mot's
grumpy to?day. Set the

bar?rel just in?side the door, here. It's too heavy for me. Missed
a few meals of late, I

have.”

Sheemie bent from the waist (bow yer best bow, Sai Thorin had said, and here he

was, do?ing just that), gri?mac?ing, not dar?ing to ease the pressure on his back by

mov?ing his feet be?cause the snake was still on them. When he straight?ened, Rhea

was hold?ing out an old and stained en?ve?lope. The flap had been sealed with a blob

of red wax. Sheemie dread?ed to think what might have been ren?dered down to

make wax such as that.

“Take this and give it to Cordelia Del?ga?do. Do ye know her?”

“A-?Aye,” Sheemie man?aged. “Su?san-?sai’s aun?tie.”

“That’s right.” Sheemie reached ten?ta?tive?ly for the en?ve?lope, but she held it back a

mo?ment. “Can’t read, can ye, id?iot boy?”

“Nay. Words ‘n let?ters go right out of my head.”

“Good. Mind ye show this to no one who can, or some night ye’ll find Er?mot

wait?ing un?der yer pil?low. I see far, Sheemie, d’ye mark me? I see far”

It was just an en?ve?lope, but it felt heavy and some?how dread?ful in Sheemie’s

fin?gers, as if it were made out of hu?man skin in?stead of pa?per. And what sort of

let?ter could Rhea be send?ing Cordelia Del?ga?do, any way? Sheemie thought back

to the day he’d seen sai Del?ga?do’s face all cov?ered with cob?web?bies, and shiv?ered.

The hor?rid crea?ture lurk?ing be fore him in the door?way of her hut could have been

the very crea?ture who’d spun those webs.

“Lose it and I’ll know,” Rhea whis?pered. “Show my busi?ness to an oth?er, and I’ll

know. Re?mem?ber, son of Stan?ley, I see far.”

“I’ll be care?ful, sai.” It might be bet?ter if he did lose the en?ve?lope, but he wouldn’t.

Sheemie was dim in the head, ev?ery?one said so, but not so dim that he didn’t

un?der?stand why he had been called up here: not to de liv?er a bar?rel of graf, but to

re?ceive this let?ter and pass it on.

“Would ye care to come in for a bit?” she whis?pered, and then point?ed a ringer at

his crotch. "If I give ye a lit?tle bit of mush?room to eat—spe?cial to me, it is—I can

look like any?one ye fan?cy."

"Oh, I can't," he said, clutch?ing his trousers and smil?ing a huge broad smile that

felt like a scream try?ing to get out of his skin. "That pesky thing fell off last week,
that did."

For a mo?ment Rhea on?ly gaw?ped at him, gen?uine?ly sur?prised for one of the few

times in her life, and then she once more broke out in chuff?ing bursts of laugh?ter.

She held her stom?ach in her waxy hands and rocked back and forth with glee.

Er?mot, star?tled, streaked in?to the house on his lengthy green bel?ly. From

some?where in its depths, her cat hissed at it.

"Go on," Rhea said, still laugh?ing. She leaned for?ward and dropped three or four

pen?nies in?to his shirt pock?et. "Get out of here, ye great ga?loo?phus! Don't ye linger,

ei?ther, look?ing at flow?ers!"

"No, sai—"

Be?fore he could say more, the door clapped to so hard that dust puffed out of the

cracks be?tween the boards.

7

Roland sur?prised Cuth?bert by sug?gest?ing at two o' the clock that they go back to

the Bar K. When Bert asked why, Roland on?ly shrugged and would say noth?ing

more. Bert looked at Alain and saw a queer, mus?ing ex?pres?sion on the boy's face.

As they drew clos?er to the bunkhouse, a sense of fore?bod?ing filled Cuth?bert. They

topped a rise, and looked down at the Bar K. The bunk-?house door stood open.

"Roland!" Alain cried. He was point?ing to the cot?ton?wood grove where the ranch's

spring was. Their clothes, neat?ly hung to dry when they left, were now scat?tered

hell-?to-?break?fast.

Cuth?bert dis?mount?ed and ran to them. Picked up a shirt, sniffed it, flung it away.

"Pissed on!" he cried in?dig?nant?ly.

"Come on," Roland said. "Let's look at the dam?age."

8

There was a lot of dam?age to look at. As you ex?pect?ed, Cuth?bert thought, gaz?ing at

Roland. Then he turned to Alain, who ap?peared gloomy but not re?al?ly sur?prised.

As you both ex?pect?ed.

Roland bent to?ward one of the dead pi?geons, and plucked at some thing so fine

Cuth?bert at first couldn't see what it was. Then he straight ened up and held it out

to his friends. A sin?gle hair. Very long, very white. He opened the pinch of his

thumb and fore?fin?ger and let it waft to the floor. There it lay amid the shred?ded

re?mains of Cuth?bert All?go?od's moth?er and fa?ther.

"If you knew that old cor?bie was here, why didn't we come back and end his

breath?" Cuth?bert heard him?self ask.

"Be?cause the time was wrong," Roland said mild?ly.

"He would have done it, had it been one of us in his place, de?stroy?ing his things."

"We're not like him," Roland said mild?ly.

"I'm go?ing to find him and blow his teeth out the back of his head."

"Not at all," Roland said mild?ly.

If Bert had to lis?ten to one more mild word from Roland's mouth, he would run

mad. All thoughts of fel?low?ship and ka?-tet left his mind, which sank back in?to his

body and was at once oblit?er?at?ed by sim?ple red fury. Jonas had been here. Jonas

had pissed on their clothes, called Alain's moth?er a cunt, torn up their most

trea?sured pic?tures, paint?ed child?ish ob scen?ities on their walls, killed their pi?geons.

Roland had known . . . done noth?ing . . . in?tend?ed to con?tin?ue do?ing noth?ing.

Ex?cept fuck his gilly?-girl. He would do plen?ty of that, aye, be?cause now that was

all he cared about.

But she won't like the look of your face the next time you climb in?to the sad?dle,

Cuth?bert thought. I'll see to that.

He drew back his fist. Alain caught his wrist. Roland turned

away and be?gan

pick?ing up scat?tered blan?kets, as if Cuth?bert's fu?ri?ous face and cocked fist were

sim?ply of no ac?count to him.

Cuth?bert balled up his oth?er fist, mean?ing to make Alain let go of him, one way or

the oth?er, but the sight of his friend's round and hon?est face, so guile?less and

dis?mayed, qui?et?ed his rage a lit?tle. His ar?gu?ment wasn't with Alain. Cuth?bert was

sure the oth?er boy had known some?thing bad was hap?pen?ing here, but he was al?so

sure that Roland had in?sist?ed Alain do noth?ing un?til Jonas was gone.

"Come with me," Alain mut?tered, sling?ing an arm around Bert's shoul?ders.

"Out?side. For your fa?ther's sake, come. You have to cool off. This is no time to be

fight?ing among our?selves."

"It's no time for our lead?er's brains to drain down in?to his prick, ei ther," Cuth?bert

said, mak?ing no ef?fort to low?er his voice. But the sec?ond time Alain tugged him,

Bert al?lowed him?self to be led to?ward the door.

I'll stay my rage at him this one last time, he thought, but I think—I know—that is

all I can man?age. I'll have Alain tell him so.

The idea of us?ing Alain as a go-?be?tween to his best friend—of know ing that

things had come to such a pass—filled Cuth?bert with an an?gry, de spair?ing rage,

and at the door to the porch he turned back to Roland. "She has made you a

cow?ard, " he said in the High Speech. Be?side him, Alain drew in his breath

sharply.

Roland stopped as if sud?den?ly turned to stone, his back to them, his arms full of

blan?kets. In that mo?ment Cuth?bert was sure Roland would turn and rush to?ward

him. They would fight, like?ly un?til one of them was dead or blind or un?con?scious.

Like?ly that one would be him, but he no longer cared.

But Roland nev?er turned. In?stead, in the same speech, he said: "He came to steal

our guile and our caution. With you, he has succeeded. ”

“No,” Cuthbert said, lapsing back into the low speech. “I know that part of you

really believes that, but it’s not so. The truth is, you’ve lost your compass. You’ve

called your careless love and made a virtue of irresponsibility. I—”

“For gods’ sake, come!” Alain nearly snarled, and yanked him out the door.

9

With Roland out of sight, Cuthbert felt his rage veering toward Alain in spite of

himself; it turned like a weather-vane when the wind shifts. The two of them stood

facing each other in the sunshiny doorway, Alain looking unhappy and distracted,

Cuthbert with his hands knotted into fists so tight they trembled at his sides.

“Why do you always excuse him? Why?”

“Out on the Drop, he asked if I trusted him. I said I did. And I do.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“And he’s a gunslinger. It he says we must wait longer, we must.”

“He’s a gunslinger by accident! A freak! A mutant!”

Alain stared at him in silent shock.

“Come with me, Alain. It’s time to end this mad game. We’ll find Jonas and kill

him. Our knot is broken. We’ll make a new one, you and I.”

“It’s not broken. If it does break, it’ll be you responsible. And for that I’ll never

forgive you.”

Now it was Cuthbert’s turn to be silent.

“Go for a ride, why don’t you? A long one. Give yourself time to cool off. So

much depends on our fellowship—”

“Tell him that!”

“No, I’m telling you. Jonas wrote a foul word about my mother. Don’t you think I’d

go with you just to avenge that, if I didn’t think that Roland was right? That it’s

what Jonas wants? For us to lose our wits and come charging blindly around our

Hillock?”

“That’s right, but it’s wrong, too,” Cuthbert said. Yet his hands

were slow?ly

un?rolling, fists be?com?ing fin?gers again. “You don’t see and I don’t have the words

to ex?plain. If I say that Su?san has poi?soned the well of our ka-?tet, you would call

me jeal?ous. Yet I think she has, all un?know?ing and un?mean?ing. She’s poi?soned his

mind, and the door to hell has opened. Roland feels the heat from that open door

and thinks it’s on?ly his feel?ing for her . . . but we must do bet?ter, Al. We must think

bet?ter. For him as well as for our?selves and our fa?thers.”

“Are you call?ing her our en?emy?”

“No! It would be eas?ier if she was.” He took a deep breath, let it out, took an?oth?er,

let it out, took a third and let it out. With each one he felt a lit?tle san?er, a lit?tle

more him?self. “Nev?er mind. There’s no more to say on’t for now. Your ad?vice is

good—I think I will take a ride. A long one.”

Bert start?ed to?ward his horse, then turned back.

“Tell him he’s wrong. Tell him that even if he’s right about wait?ing, he’s right for

the wrong rea?sons, and that makes him all the way wrong.” He hes?itat?ed. “Tell

him what I said about the door to hell. Say that’s my piece of the touch. Will you

tell him?”

“Yes. Stay away from Jonas, Bert.”

Cuth?bert mount?ed up. “I promise noth?ing.”

“You’re not a man.” Alain sound?ed sor?row?ful; on the point of tears, in fact. “None of us are men.”

“You bet?ter be wrong about that,” Cuth?bert said, “be?cause men’s work is com?ing.”

He turned his mount and rode away at a gal?lop.

10

He went far up the Sea?coast Road, to be?gin with try?ing not to think at all. He’d

found that some?times un?ex?pect?ed things wan?dered in?to your head if you left the

door open for them. Use?ful things, of?ten.

This af?ter?noon that didn’t hap?pen. Con?fused, mis?er?able, and with?out a fresh idea in

his head (or even the hope of one), Bert at last turned back to

Ham?bry. He rode the

High Street from end to end, wav?ing or speak?ing to peo?ple who hiled him. The

three of them had met a lot of good peo?ple here. Some he counted as friends, and

he rather felt the com?mon folk of Ham?bry?town had adopt?ed them—young fel?lows

who were far from their own homes and fam?ilies. And the more Bert knew and

saw of these com mon folk, the less he sus?pect?ed that they were a part of Rimer's

and Jonas's nasty lit?tle game. Why else had the Good Man cho?sen Ham?bry in the

first place, if not be?cause it pro?vid?ed such ex?cel?lent cov?er?

There were plen?ty of folk out to?day. The farm?ers' mar?ket was boom ing, the street-

stalls were crowd?ed, chil?dren were laugh?ing at a Pinch and Jil?ly show (Jil?ly was

cur?rent?ly chas?ing Pinch back and forth and bash?ing the poor old long?suf?fer?ing

fel?low with her broom), and the Reap?ing Fair dec?ora?tions were go?ing for?ward at

speed. Yet Cuth?bert felt on?ly a lit?tle joy and an?tic?ipa?tion at the thought of the Fair.

Be?cause it wasn't his own, wasn't Gilead Reap?ing? Per?haps . . . but most?ly just

be?cause his mind and heart were so heavy. If this was what grow?ing up was like,

he thought he could have skipped the ex?pe?ri?ence.

He rode on out of town, the ocean now at his back, the sun full in his face, his

shad?ow grow?ing ev?er longer be?hind him. He thought he'd soon veer off the Great

Road and ride across the Drop to the Bar K. But be?fore he could, here came his

old friend, Sheemie, lead?ing a mule. Sheemie's head was down, his shoul?ders

slumped, his pink 'br?era askew, his boots dusty. To Cuth?bert he looked as though

he had walked all the way from the tip of the earth.

"Sheemie!" Cuth?bert cried, al?ready an?tic?ipat?ing the boy's cheery grin and loony

pat?ter. "Long days and pleas?ant nights! How are y—"

Sheemie lift?ed his head, and as the brim of his som?brero came

up, Cuthbert fell
silent. He saw the dreadful fear on the boy's face—the pale
checks, the haunted
eyes, the trembling mouth.

11

Sheemie could have been at the Delgado place two hours ago,
if he'd wanted, but

he had trudged along at a turtle's pace, the letter inside his
shirt seeming to drag at

his every step. It was awful, so awful. He couldn't even think
about it, because his

thinker was mostly broken, so it was.

Cuthbert was off his horse in a flash, and hurrying to
Sheemie. He put his hands

on the boy's shoulders. "What's wrong? Tell your old pal. He
won't laugh, not a
bit."

At the sound of "Arthur Heath's" kind voice and the sight of his
concerned face,

Sheemie began to weep. Rhea's strict command that he should
tell no one flew out

of his head. Still sobbing, he recounted every thing that had
happened since that

morning. Twice Cuthbert had to ask him to slow down, and
when Bert led the boy

to a tree in whose shade the two of them sat together,
Sheemie was finally able to

do so. Cuthbert listened with growing unease. At the end of
his tale, Sheemie

produced an envelope from inside his shirt.

Cuthbert broke the seal and read what was inside, his eyes
growing large.

12

Roy DePape was waiting for him at the Travellers' Rest when
Jonas returned in

good spirits from his trip to the Bar K. An outsider had finally
shown up, DePape

announced, and Jonas's spirits rose another notch. Only
Roy didn't look as happy

about it as Jonas would have expected. Not happy at all.

"Fellow's gone on to Seafront, where I guess he's expected,"
DePape said. "He

wants you right away. I wouldn't linger here to eat, not even a
popkin, if I were

you. I wouldn't take a drink, either. You'll want a clear head to

deal with this one."

"Free with your advice to-day, ain't you, Roy?" Jonas said. He spoke in a heavy

sarcastic tone, but when Pettie brought him a tot of whiskey, he sent it back and

asked for water instead. Roy had a bit of a look to him, Jonas decided. Too pale by

half, was good old Roy. And when Sheb sat down at his piano-bench and struck a

chord, De-pape jerked in that direction, one hand dropping to the butt of his gun.

Interested. And a little disquieting.

"Spill it, son—what's got your back hair up?"

Roy shook his head slowly. "Don't rightly know."

"What's this fellow's name?"

"I didn't ask, he didn't say. He showed me Farson's sigil, though. You know."

De-pape lowered his voice a little. "The eye."

Jonas knew, all right. He hated that wide-open staring eye, couldn't imagine what

had possessed Farson to pick it in the first place. Why not a mailed fist? Crossed

swords? Or a bird? A falcon, for instance—a falcon would have made a fine sigil.

But that eye—

"All right," he said, finishing the glass of water. It went down better than whiskey

would have done, anyway—dry as a bone, he'd been. "I'll find out the rest for

myself, shall I?"

As he reached the batwing doors and pushed them open, De-pape called his name.

Jonas turned back.

"He looks like other people," De-pape said. "What do you mean?"

"I don't hardly know." De-pape looked embarrassed and bewildered... but dogged,

too. Sticking to his guns. "We only talked five minutes in all, but once I looked at

him and thought it was the old bastard from Ritzy—the one I shot. Little bit later I

threw him a glance and think, 'Hellfire, it's my old pa standing there.' Then that

went by, too, and he looked like him self again."

"And how's that?"

"You'll see for your?self, I reckon. I don't know if you'll like it much, though."

Jonas stood with one batwing pushed open, thinking. "Roy, 'twasn't Far?son

him?self, was it? The Good Man in some sort of disguise?" De?pape hes?itat?ed,

frown?ing, and then shook his head. "No." "Are you sure? We on?ly saw him the

once, re?mem?ber, and not close-to." Lati?go had point?ed him out. Six?teen months

ago that had been, give or take.

"I'm sure. You re?mem?ber how big he was?"

Jonas nod?ded. Far?son was no Lord Perth, but he was six feet or more, and broad

across at both brace and bas?ket.

"This man's Clay's height, or less. And he stays the same height no mat?ter who he

looks like." De?pape hes?itat?ed a mo?ment and said: "He laughs like a dead per?son. I

could bare?ly stand to hear him do it."

"What do you mean, like a dead per?son?"

Roy De?pape shook his head. "Can't right?ly say."

13

Twen?ty min?utes lat?er, El?dred Jonas was rid?ing be?neath come in peace mid in?to the

court?yard of Seafront, un?easy be?cause he had ex?pect?ed Lati?go . . . and un?less Roy

was very much mis?tak?en, it wasn't Lati?go he was get?ting.

Miguel shuf?fled for?ward, grin?ning his gum?my old grin, and took the reins of

Jonas's horse.

"Re?conocimien?to."

"Por na?da, jefe."

Jonas went in, saw Olive Thorin sit?ting in the front par?lor like a for lorn ghost, and

nod?ded to her. She nod?ded back, and man?aged a wan smile.

"Sai Jonas, how well you look. If you see Hart—"

"Cry your par?don, la?dy, but it's the Chan?cel?lor I've come to see," Jonas said. He

went on quick?ly up?stairs to?ward the Chan?cel?lor's suite of rooms, then down a

nar?row stone hall lit (and not too well) with gas-?jets.

When he reached the end of the cor?ri?dor, he rapped on the door wait ing there—a

mas?sive thing of oak and brass set in its own arch. Rimer didn't

care for such as

Su?san Del?ga?do, but he loved the trap?ings of pow?er; that was what took the curve

out of his noo?dle and made it straight. Jonas rapped.

“Come in, my friend,” a voice—not Rimer’s—called. It was fol?lowed by a tit?tery

laugh that made Jonas’s flesh creep. He laughs like a dead per?son, Roy had said.

Jonas pushed open the door and stepped in. Rimer cared for in?cense no more than

he cared for the hips and lips of wom?en, but there was in cense burn?ing in here

now—a woody smell that made Jonas think of court at Gilead, and func?tions of

state in the Great Hall. The gas-?jets were turned high. The draperies—pur?ple

vel?vet, the col?or of roy?al?ty, Rimer’s ab?so?lute fa?vorite—trem?bled minute?ly in the

breath of sea breeze com?ing in through the open win?dows. Of Rimer there was no

sign. Or of any?one else, come to that. There was a lit?tle bal?cony, but the doors

giv?ing on it were open, and no one was out there.

Jonas stepped a lit?tle far?ther in?to the room, glanc?ing in?to a gilt-?framed mir?ror on

the far side to check be?hind him with?out turn?ing his head. No one there, ei?ther.

Ahead and to the left was a ta?ble with places set for two and a cold sup?per in

place, but no one in ei?ther chair. Yet some?one had spo?ken to him. Some?one who’d

been di?rect?ly on the oth?er side of the door, from the sound. Jonas drew his gun.

“Come, now,” said the voice which had bid him en?ter. It came from di?rect?ly

be?hind Jonas’s left shoul?der. “No need for that, we’re all friends here. All on the

same side, you know.”

Jonas whirled on his heels, sud?den?ly feel?ing old and slow. Stand?ing there was a

man of medi?um height, pow?er?ful?ly built from the look of him, with bright blue

eyes and the rosy cheeks of ei?ther good health or good wine. His part?ed, smil?ing

lips re?vealed cun?ning lit?tle teeth which must have been filed

to points—sure?ly

such points couldn't be nat?ural. He wore a black robe, like the robe of a holy man,

with the hood pushed back. Jonas's first thought, that the fel?low was bald, had

been wrong, he saw. The hair was sim?ply cropped so strin?gent?ly that it was

noth?ing but fuzz.

"Put the bean?shoot?er away," the man in black said. "We're friends here, I tell

you—ab?so?lute?ly pal?sy-?wal?sy. We'll break bread and speak of many things—ox?en

and oil-?tankers and whether or not Frank Sina?tra re?al?ly was a bet?ter croon?er than

Der Bin?gle."

"Who? A bet?ter what?"

"No one you know; noth?ing that mat?ters." The man in black tit?tered again. It was,

Jonas thought, the sort of sound one might ex?pect to hear drift?ing through the

barred win?dows of a lu?natic asy?lum.

He turned. Looked in?to the mir?ror again. This time he saw the man in black

stand?ing there and smil?ing at him, big as life. Gods, had he been there all along?

Yes, but you couldn't see him un?til he was ready to be seen. I don't know if he's a

wiz?ard, but he's a glam?or-?man, all right. May?hap even Far?son's sor?cer?er.

He turned back. The man in the priest's robe was still smil?ing. No point?ed teeth

now. But they had been point?ed. Jonas would lay his watch and war?rant on it.

"Where's Rimer?"

"I sent him away to work with young sai Del?ga?do on her Reap?ing Day

cat?echisms," the man in black said. He slung a chum?my arm around Jonas's

shoul?ders and be?gan lead?ing him to?ward the ta?ble. "Best we palaver alone, I think."

Jonas didn't want to of?fend Far?son's man, but he couldn't bear the touch of that

arm. He couldn't say why, but it was un?bear?able. Pestilen tial. He shrugged it off

and went on to one of the chairs, trying not to shiver. No wonder De?pape had come back from Hang?ing Rock looking pale. No damned wonder.

Instead of being offended, the man in black tilted again (Yes, Jonas thought, he

does laugh like the dead, very like, so he does). For one moment Jonas thought it

was Far?do, Cort's father, in this room with him— that it was the man who had sent

him west all those years ago—and he reached for his gun again. Then it was just

the man in black, smiling at him in an unpleasantly knowing way, those blue eyes

dancing like the flame from the gas-jets.

"See something interesting, sai Jonas?"

"Aye," Jonas said, sitting down. "Eats." He took a piece of bread and popped it

into his mouth. The bread stuck to his dry tongue, but he chewed determinedly all

the same.

"Good boy." The other also sat, and poured wine, filling Jonas's glass first. "Now,

my friend, tell me everything you've done since the three trouble?some boys

arrived, and everything you know, and everything you have planned. I would not

have you leave out a single jot."

"First show me your signal."

"Of course. How prudent you are."

The man in black reached inside his robe and brought out a square of

metal—silver, Jonas guessed. He tossed it onto the table, and it clattered across to

Jonas's plate. Engraved on it was what he had expected—that hideous staring eye.

"Satisfied?"

Jonas nodded.

"Slide it back to me."

Jonas reached for it, but for once his normally steady hand resembled his reedy,

unstable voice. He watched the fingers tremble for a moment, then lowered the

hand quickly to the table.

"I... I don't want to."

No. He didn't want to. Suddenly he knew that if he touched it, the engraved silver eye would roll... and look directly at him.

The man in black tilted and made a come-along gesture with the fingers of his

right hand. The silver buckle (that was what it looked like to Jonas) slid back to

him . . . and up the sleeve of his homespun robe.

"Abracadabra! Bool! The end! Now," the man in black went on, sipping his wine

delicately, "if we have finished the tiresome formalities..."

"One more," Jonas said. "You know my name; I would know yours."

"Call me Walter," the man in black said, and the smile suddenly fell off his lips.

"Good old Walter, that's me. Now let us see where we are, and where we're going.

Let us, in short, palaver."

14

When Cuthbert came back into the bunkhouse, night had fallen. Roland and Alain

were playing cards. They had cleaned the place up so that it looked almost as it

had (thanks to turpentine found in a closet of the old foreman's office, even the

slogans written on the walls were just pink ghosts of their former selves), and now

were deeply involved in a game of Casa Fuerte, or Hotpatch, as it was known in

their own part of the world. Either way, it was basically a two-man version of

Watch Me, the card-game which had been played in bars and bunkhouses

and around campfires since the world was young.

Roland looked up at once, trying to read Bert's emotional weather. Outwardly,

Roland was as impassive as ever, had even played Alain to a draw across four

difficult hands, but inwardly he was in a turmoil of pain and indecision. Alain had

told him what Cuthbert had said while the two of them stood talking in the yard,

and they were terrible things to hear from a friend, even when they came at second

hand. Yet what haunted him more was what Bert had said just before leaving:

You've called your careless love and made a virtue of irresponsible. Was

there even a chance he had done such a thing? Over and over he told himself

no—that the course he had ordered them to follow was hard but sensible, the only

course that made sense. Cuthbert's shouting was just so much angry wind, brought

on by nerves . . . and his fury at having their private place defiled so outrageously.

Still. . .

Tell him he's right for the wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong.

That couldn't be.

Could it?

Cuthbert was smiling and his color was high, as if he had galloped most of the

way back. He looked young, handsome, and vital. He looked happy, in fact,

almost like the Cuthbert of old—the one who'd been capable of babbling happy

nonsense to a rook's skull until someone told him to please, please shut up.

But Roland didn't trust what he saw. There was something wrong with the smile,

the color in Bert's cheeks could have been anger rather than good health, and the

sparkle in his eyes looked like fever instead of humor. Roland showed nothing on

his own face, but his heart sank. He'd hoped the storm would blow itself out, given

a little time, but he didn't think it had. He shot a glance at Alain, and saw that

Alain felt the same.

Cuthbert, it will be over in three weeks. If only I could tell you that.

The thought which returned was stunning in its simplicity: Why can't you?

He realized he didn't know. Why had he been holding back, keeping his own

counsel? For what purpose? Had he been blind? Gods, had he?

"Hello, Bert," he said, "did you have a nice ride—"

"Yes, very nice, a very nice ride, an instructive ride. Come outside. I want to show

you something."

Roland liked the thin glaze of hilarity in Bert's eyes less and less, but he laid his

cards in a neat face-down fan on the table and got up.

Alain pulled at his sleeve. "No!" His voice was low and panicky. "Do you not see

how he looks?"

"I see," Roland said. And felt dismay in his heart.

For the first time, as he walked slowly toward the friend who no longer looked

like a friend, it occurred to Roland that he had been making decisions in a state

close akin to drunkenness. Or had he been making decisions at all? He was no

longer sure.

"What is it you'd show me, Bert?"

"Something wonderful," Bert said, and laughed. There was hate in the sound.

Perhaps murder. "You'll want a good close look at this. I know you will."

"Bert, what's wrong with you?" Alain asked.

"Wrong with me? Nothing wrong with me, Al—I'm as happy as a dart at sunrise, a

bee in a flower, a fish in the ocean." And as he turned away to

go back through the

door, he laughed again.

“Don’t go out there,” Alain said. “He’s lost his wits.”

“If our fel?low?ship is bro?ken, any chance we might have of get?ting out of Mejis

alive is gone,” Roland said. “That be?ing the case, I’d rather die at the hands of a

friend than an en?emy.”

He went out. Af?ter a mo?ment of hes?ita?tion, Alain fol?lowed. On his face was a look of purest mis?ery.

15

Huntress had gone and De?mon had not yet be?gun to show his face, but the sky was

pow?dered with stars, and they threw enough light to see by. Cuth?bert’s horse, still

sad?dled, was tied to the hitch?ing rail. Be?yond it, the square of dusty door?yard

gleamed like a canopy of tar?nished sil?ver.

“What is it?” Roland asked. They weren’t wear?ing guns, any of them. That was to

be grate?ful for, at least. “What would you show me?”

“It’s here.” Cuth?bert stopped at a point mid?way be?tween the bunk?house and the

charred re?mains of the home place. He point?ed with great as?sur?ance, but Roland

could see noth?ing out of the or?di?nary. He walked over to Cuth?bert and looked

down.

“I don’t see—”

Bril?liant light—starshine times a thou?sand—ex?plod?ed in his head as Cuth?bert’s fist

drove against the point of his chin. It was the first time, ex?cept in play (and as

very small boys), that Bert had ev?er struck him. Roland didn’t lose con?scious?ness,

but he did lose con?trol over his arms and legs. They were there, but seem?ing?ly in

an?oth?er coun?try, flail?ing like the limbs of a rag doll. He went down on his back.

Dust puffed up around him. The stars seemed strange?ly in mo?tion, run?ning in arcs

and leav?ing milky trails be?hind them. There was a high ring?ing in his ears.

From a great dis?tance he heard Alain scream: “Oh, you fool!

You stupid fool!"

By making a tremendous effort, Roland was able to turn his head. He saw Alain

start toward him and saw Cuthbert, no longer smiling, push him away. "This is

between us, Al. You stay out of it."

"You sucker-punched him, you bastard!" Alain, slow to anger, was now building

toward a rage Cuthbert might well regret. I have to get up, Roland thought. I have

to get between them before something even worse happens. His arms and legs

began to swim weakly in the dust.

"Yes—that's how he's played us," Cuthbert said. "I only returned the favor." He

looked down. "That's what I wanted to show you, Roland.

That particular piece of ground. That particular puff of dust in which you are now

lying. Get a good taste of it. Maybe it'll wake you up."

Now Roland's own anger began to rise. He felt the coldness that was seeping into

his thoughts, fought it, and realized he was losing. Jonas ceased to matter; the

tankers at Citgo ceased to matter; the supply conspiracy they had uncovered

ceased to matter. Soon the Affiliation and the ka-tet he had been at such pains to

preserve would cease to matter as well.

The surface numbness was leaving his feet and legs, and he pushed himself to a

sitting position. He looked up calmly at Bert, his tented hands on the ground, his

face set. Starshine swam in his eyes.

"I love you, Cuthbert, but I'll have no more insubordination and jealous tantrums.

If I paid you back for all, I reckon you'd finish in pieces, so I'm only going to pay

you for hitting me when I didn't know it was coming."

"And I've no doubt ye can, cully," Cuthbert said, falling effortlessly into the

Hambrypatois. "But first ye might want to have a peek at this." Almost

contemptuously, he tossed a folded sheet of paper. It hit Roland's chest and

bounced into his lap.

Roland picked it up, feeling the fine point of his de?vel?op?ing rage lose its edge.

“What is it?”

“Open and see. There’s enough starlight to read by.”

Slowly, with re?luc?tant fin?gers, Roland un?fold?ed the sheet of pa?per and read what was print?ed there.

He read it twice. The sec?ond time was ac?tu?al?ly hard?er, be?cause his hands had

be?gun to trem?ble. He saw ev?ery place he and Su?san had met — the boathouse, the

hut, the shack—and now he saw them in a new light, know?ing some?one else had

seen them, too. How clever he had be?lieved they were be?ing. How con?fi?dent of

their se?cre?cy and their dis?cre?tion. And yet some?one had been watch?ing all the

time. Su?san had been right. Some one had seen.

I’ve put ev?ery?thing at risk. Her life as well as our lives.

Tell him what I said about the door?way to hell.

And Su?san’s voice, too: Ka like a wind . . . if you love me, then love me.

So he had done, be?liev?ing in his youth?ful ar?ro?gance that ev?ery?thing would turn out

all right for no oth?er rea?son—yes, at bot?tom he had be lieved this—than that he

was he, and ka must serve his love.

“I’ve been a fool,” he said. His voice trem?bled like his hands.

“Yes, in?deed,” Cuth?bert said. “So you have.” He dropped to his knees in the dust,

fac?ing Roland. “Now if you want to hit me, hit away. Hard as you want and as

many as you can man?age. I’ll not hit back. I’ve done all I can to wake you up to

your re?spon?si?bil?ities. If you still sleep, so be it. Ei ther way, I still love you.” Bert

put his hands on Roland’s shoul?ders and briefly kissed his friend’s cheek.

Roland be?gan to cry. They were part?ly tears of grat?itude, but most?ly those of

min?gled shame and con?fu?sion; there was even a small, dark part of him that hat?ed

Cuth?bert and al?ways would. That part hat?ed Cuth?bert more on ac?count of the kiss

than be?cause of the un?ex?pect?ed punch on the jaw; more for

the for?give?ness than
the awak?en?ing.

He got to his feet, still hold?ing the let?ter in one dusty hand,
the oth?er in?ef?fec?tu?al?ly

brush?ing his cheeks and leav?ing damp smears there. When he
stag?ered and

Cuth?bert put out a hand to steady him, Roland pushed him so
hard that Cuth?bert

him?self would have fall?en, if Alain hadn't caught hold of his
shoul?ders.

Then, slow?ly, Roland went back down again—this time in front
of Cuth?bert with

his hands up and his head down.

“Roland, no!” Cuth?bert cried.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I have for?got?ten the face of my fa?ther,
and cry your par?don.”

“Yes, all right, for gods' sake, yes!” Cuth?bert now sound?ed as
if he were cry?ing

him?self. “Just... please get up! It breaks my heart to see you
so!”

And mine to be so, Roland thought. To be hum?bled so. But I
brought it on my?self,

didn't I? This dark yard, with my head throb?bing and my heart
full of shame and

fear. This is mine, bought and paid for.

They helped him up and Roland let him?self be helped. “That's
quite a left, Bert,”

he said in a voice that al?most passed for nor?mal.

“On?ly when it's go?ing to?ward some?one who doesn't know
it's com ing,” Cuth?bert
replied.

“This let?ter—how did you come by it?”

Cuth?bert told of meet?ing Sheemie, who had been dither?ing
along in his own

mis?ery, as if wait?ing for ka to in?ter?vene ... and, in the per?
son of “Arthur Heath,” ka

had.

“From the witch,” Roland mused. “Yes, but how did she know?
For she nev?er

leaves the Coos, or so Su?san has told me.”

“I can't say. Nor do I much care. What I'm most con?cerned
about right now is

mak?ing sure that Sheemie isn't hurt be?cause of what he told
me and gave me. Af?ter

that, I'm con?cerned that what old witch Rhea has tried to tell

once she doesn't try
to tell again."

"I've made at least one terrible mistake," Roland said, "but I don't count loving

Susan as another. That was beyond me to change. As it was beyond her. Do you
believe that?"

"Yes," Alain said at once, and after a moment, almost reluctantly, Cuthbert said,

"Aye, Roland."

"I've been arrogant and stupid. If this note had reached her aunt, she could have
been sent into exile."

"And we to the devil, by way of hangropes," Cuthbert added dryly. "Although I

know that's a minor matter to you by comparison."

"What about the witch?" Alain asked. "What do we do about her?" Roland smiled

a little, and turned toward the northwest. "Rhea," he said. "Whatever else she is,

she's a first-class troublemaker, is she not? And troublemakers must be put on
notice."

He started back toward the bunkhouse, trudging with his head down. Cuthbert

looked at Alain, and saw that Alain was also a little teary-eyed. Bert put out his hand.

For a moment Alain only looked at it. Then he nodded—to himself rather than to

Cuthbert, it seemed—and shook it.

"You did what you had to," Alain said. "I had my doubts at first, but not now."

Cuthbert let out his breath. "And I did it the way I had to. If I hadn't surprised
him—"

"—he would have beaten you black and blue."

"So many more colors than that," Cuthbert said. "I would have looked like a
rainbow."

"The Wizard's Rainbow, even," Alain said. "Extra colors for your penny."

That made Cuthbert laugh. The two of them walked back toward the bunkhouse,

where Roland was unsaddling Bert's horse.

Cuthbert turned in that direction to help, but Alain held him

back. "Leave him

alone for a little while," he said. "It's best you do."

They went on ahead, and when Roland came in ten minutes later, he found

Cuthbert playing his hand. And winning with it.

"Bert," he said.

Cuthbert looked up.

"We have a spot of business tomorrow, you and I. Up on the Coos." "Are we

going to kill her?"

Roland thought, and thought hard. At last he looked up, biting his lip. "We should."

"Aye. We should. But are we going to?"

"Not unless we have to, I reckon." Later he would regret this decision—if it was a

decision—bitingly, but there never came a time when he did not understand it. He

had been a boy not much older than Jake Chambers during that Mejis fall, and the

decision to kill does not come easily or naturally to most boys. "Not unless she makes us."

"Perhaps it would be best if she did," Cuthbert said. It was hard gun-slinger talk, but he looked troubled as he said it.

"Yes. Perhaps it would. It's not likely, though, not in one as sly as her. Be ready to get up early."

"All right. Do you want your hand back?"

"When you're on the verge of knocking him out? Not at all."

Roland went past them to his bunk. There he sat, looking at his folded hands in his

lap. He might have been praying; he might only have been thinking hard. Cuthbert

looked at him for a moment, then turned back to his cards.

16

The sun was just over the horizon when Roland and Cuthbert left the next

morning. The Drop, still drenched with morning dew, seemed to bum with orange

fire in the early light. Their breath and that of their horses puffed frosty in the air.

It was a morning neither of them ever forgot. For the first time in their lives they

went forth wear?ing bol?stered re?volvers; for the first time in their lives they went

in?to the world as gun?slings.

Cuth?bert said not a word—he knew that if he start?ed, he’d do noth?ing but bab?ble

great streams of his usu?al non?sense—and Roland was quiet by na?ture. There was

on?ly one ex?change be?tween them, and it was brief.

“I said I made at least one very bad mis?take,” Roland told him.

“One that this

note”—he touched his breast pock?et—“brought home to me.

Do you know what

that mis?take was?”

“Not lov?ing her—not that,” Cuth?bert said. “You called that ka, and I call it the

same.” It was a re?lief to be able to say this, and a greater one to be?lieve it. Cuth?bert

thought he could even ac?cept Su?san her?self now, not us his best friend’s lover, a

girl he had want?ed him?self the first time he saw her, but as a part of their en?twined

fate.

“No,” Roland said. “Not lov?ing her, but think?ing that love could some?how be apart

from ev?ery?thing else. That I could live two lives—one with you and Al and our

job here, one with her. I thought that love could lilt me above ka, the way a bird’s

wings can take it above all the things that would kill it and eat it, oth?er?wise. Do

you un?der?stand?”

“It made you blind.” Cuth?bert spoke with a gen?tle?ness quite for?eign to the young

man who had suf?fered through the last two months.

“Yes,” Roland said sad?ly. “It made me blind . . . but now I see. Come on, a lit?tle

faster, if you please. I want to get this over.”

17

They rode up the rut?ty cart-?track along which Su?san (a Su?san who had known a

good deal less about the ways of the world) had come singing “Care?less Love”

be?neath the light of the Kiss?ing Moon. Where the track opened in?to Rhea’s yard,

they stopped.

"Won?der?ful view," Roland mur?mured. "You can see the whole sweep of the desert from here."

"Not much to say about the view right here in front of us, though."

That was true. The gar?den was full of un?picked mu?tie veg?eta?bles, the stuffy-?guy

pre?sid?ing over them ei?ther a bad joke or a bad omen. The yard sup?port?ed just one

tree, now moult?ing sick?ly-?look?ing fall leaves like an old vul?ture shed?ding its

feath?ers. Be?yond the tree was the hut it?self, made of rough stone and topped by a

sin?gle sooty pot of a chim?ney with a hex-?sign paint?ed on it in sneer?ing yel?low. At

the rear com?er, be?yond one over grown win?dow, was a wood?pile.

Roland had seen plen?ty of huts like it—the three of them had passed any num?ber

on their way here from Gilead—but nev?er one that felt as pow?er?ful?ly wrong as

this. He saw noth?ing un?to?ward, yet there was a feel ing, too strong to be de?nied, of

a pres?ence. One that watched and wait?ed.

Cuth?bert felt it, too. "Do we have to go clos?er?" lie swal?lowed. "Do we have to go

in? Be?cause . . . Roland, the door is open. Do you see?"

He saw. As if she ex?pect?ed them. As if she was invit?ing them in, want?ing them to

sit down with her to some un?speak?able break?fast.

"Stay here." Roland gigged Rush?er for?ward.

"No! I'm com?ing!"

"No, cov?er my back. If I need to go in?side, I'll call you to join me ... but if I need

to go in?side, the old wom?an who lives here will breathe no more. As you said, that

might be for the best."

At ev?ery slow step Rush?er took, the feel?ing of wrong?ness grew in Roland's heart

and mind. There was a stench to the place, a smell like rot ten meat and hot

pu?tre?fied toma?toes. It came from the hut, he sup?posed, but it al?so seemed to come

waft?ing out of the very ground. And at ev?ery step, the whine of the thin?ny seemed

loud?er, as if the at?mo?sphere of this place some?how mag?ni?fied it.

Su?san came up here alone, and in the dark, he thought. Gods, I'm not sure I could

have come up here in the dark with my friends for com?pa?ny.

He stopped be?neath the tree, look?ing through the open door twen?ty paces away.

He saw what could have been a kitchen; the legs of a ta?ble, the back of a chair, a

filthy hearth?stone. No sign of the la?dy of the house. But she was there. Roland

could feel her eyes crawl?ing on him like loath some bugs.

I can't see her be?cause she's used her art to make her?self dim... but she's there.

And just per?haps he did see her. The air had a strange shim?mer just in?side the door

to the right, as if it had been heat?ed. Roland had been told that you could see

some?one who was dim by turn?ing your head and look ing from the com?er of your

eye. He did that now.

"Roland?" Cuth?bert called from be?hind him.

"Fine so far, Bert." Bare?ly pay?ing at?ten?tion to the words he was say ing, be?cause

... yes! That shim?mer was clear?er now, and it had al?most the shape of a wom?an. It

could be his imag?ina?tion, of course, but...

But at that mo?ment, as if un?der?stand?ing he'd seen her, the shim?mer moved far?ther

back in?to the shad?ows. Roland glimpsed the swing?ing hem of an old black dress,

there and then gone.

No mat?ter. He had not come to see her but on?ly to give her her sin?gle warn?ing . . .

which was one more than any of their fa?thers would have giv?en her, no doubt.

"Rhea!" His voice rolled in the harsh tones of old, stem and com?mand?ing. Two

yel?low leaves fell from the tree, as if shiv?ered loose by that voice, and one fell in

his black hair. From the hut came on?ly a wait?ing, lis?ten ing si?lence . . . and then

the dis?cor?dant, jeer?ing yowl of a cat.

"Rhea, daugh?ter of none! I've brought some?thing back to you, wom?an! Some?thing

you must have lost!" From his shirt he took the folded letter and tossed it to the

stony ground. "To-day I've been your friend, Rhea—if this had gone where you had

intended it to go, you would have paid with your life."

He paused. Another leaf drifted down from the tree. This one landed in Pusher's

mane.

"Hear me well, Rhea, daughter of none, and understand me well. I have come here

under the name of Will Dearborn, but Dearborn is not my name and it is the

Affiliation I serve. More, 'tis all which lies behind the Affiliation—'tis the power

of the White. You have crossed the way of our ka, and I warn you on this once:

do not cross it again. Do you understand?"

Only that waiting silence.

"Do not touch a single hair on the head of the boy who carried your hatred

mischievous hence, or you'll die. Speak not another word of those things you know or

think you know to anyone—not to Cordelia Delgado, nor to Jonas, nor to Rimer,

nor to Thorin—or you'll die. Keep your peace and we will keep ours. Break it, and

we'll still you. Do you understand?"

More silence. Dirty windows peering at him like eyes. A puff of breeze sent more

leaves showering down around him, and caused the stuffy-guy to creak nastily on

his pole. Roland thought briefly of the cook, Hax, twisting at the end of his rope.

"Do you understand?"

No reply. Not even a shimmer could he see through the open door now.

"Very well," Roland said. "Silence gives consent." He giggled his horse around. As

he did, his head came up a little, and he saw something green shift above him

among the yellow leaves. There was a low hissing sound.

"Roland look out! Snake!" Cuthbert screamed, but before the second word had left

his mouth, Roland had drawn one of his guns.

He fell sideways in the saddle, holding with his left leg and

heel as Rush?er jiggled

and pranced. He fired three times, the thun?der of the big gun smash?ing through the

still air and then rolling back from the near?by hills. With each shot the snake

flipped up?ward again, its blood dot?ting red across a back?ground of blue sky and

yel?low leaves. The last bul?let tore off its head, and when the snake fell for good, it

hit the ground in two pieces. From with?in the hut came a wail of grief and rage so

aw?ful that Roland's spine turned to a cord of ice.

"You bas?tard!" screamed a wom?an's voice from the shad?ows. "Oh, you mur?der?ing

cull! My friend! My friend! "

"If it was your friend, you oughtn't to have set it on me," Roland said. "Re?mem?ber,

Rhea, daugh?ter of none."

The voice ut?tered one more shriek and fell silent. Roland rode back to Cuth?bert,

bol?ster?ing his gun. Bert's eyes were round and amazed. "Roland, what shoot?ing!

Gods, what shoot?ing!" "Let's get out of here."

"But we still don't know how she knew!"

"Do you think she'd tell?" There was a small but minute shake in Roland's voice.

The way the snake had come out of the tree like that, right at him ... he could still

bare?ly be?lieve he wasn't dead. Thank gods for his hand, which had tak?en mat?ters

over.

"We could make her talk," Cuth?bert said, but Roland could tell from his voice that

Bert had no taste for such. Maybe lat?er, maybe af?ter years of trail-?rid?ing and

gun?sling?ing, but now he had no more stom?ach for tor?ture than for killing out?right.

"Even if we could, we couldn't make her tell the truth. Such as her lies as oth?er

folks breathe. If we've con?vinced her to keep qui?et, we've done enough for to?day.

Come on. I hate this place."

18

As they rode back to?ward town, Roland said: "We've got to meet."

"The four of us. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Yes. I want to tell ev?ery?thing I know and sur?mise. I want to tell you my plan,

such as it is. What we've been wait?ing for."

"That would be very good in?deed."

"Su?san can help us." Roland seemed to be speak?ing to him?self. Cuth bert was

amused to see that the lone, crown like leaf was still caught in his dark hair.

"Su?san was meant to help us. Why didn't I see that?"

"Be?cause love is blind," Cuth?bert said. He snort?ed laugh?ter and clapped Roland on

the shoul?der. "Love is blind, old son."

19

When she was sure the boys were gone, Rhea crept out of her door and in?to the

hate?ful sun?shine. She hob?bled across to the tree and fell on her knees by the

tat?tered length of her snake, weep?ing loud?ly.

"Er?mot, Er?mot!" she cried. "See what's be?come of ye!"

There was his head, the mouth frozen open, the dou?ble fangs still drip?ping

poi?son—clear drops that shone like prisms in the day's strength en?ing light. The

glaz?ing eyes glared. She picked Er?mot up, kissed the scaly mouth, licked the last

of the ven?om from the ex?posed nee?dles, croon?ing and weep?ing all the while.

Next she picked up the long and tat?tered body with her oth?er hand, moan?ing at the

holes which had been torn in?to Er?mot's satiny hide; the holes and the ripped red

flesh be?neath. Twice she put the head against the body and spoke in?can?ta?tions, but

noth?ing hap?pened. Of course not. Er?mot had gone be?yond the aid of her spells.

Poor Er?mot.

She held his head to one flat?tened old dug, and his body to the oth?er. Then, with

the last of his blood wet?ting the bodice of her dress, she looked in the di?rec?tion the

hate?ful boys had gone.

"I'll pay ye back," she whis?pered. "By all the gods that ev?er were, I'll pay ye back.

When ye least ex?pect it, there Rhea will be, and your screams

will break your

throats. Do you hear me? Your screams will break your throats!"

She knelt a moment longer, then got up and shuffled back toward her hut, holding

Ernot to her bosom.

CHAPTER V

Wizard's rainbow

1

On an afternoon three days after Roland's and Cuthbert's visit to the Coos, Roy

Depepe and Clay Reynolds walked along the upstairs hallway of the Travelers'

Rest to the spacious bedroom Coral Thorin kept there. Clay knocked. Jonas called

for them to come in, it was open.

The first thing Depepe saw upon entering was sai Thorin herself, in a rocker by the

window. She wore a foamy nightdress of white silk and a red buffanda on her head.

She had a lapful of knitting. Depepe looked at her in surprise. She offered him and

Reynolds an enigmatic smile, said "Hello, gents," and returned to her needlework.

Outside there was a rattle of firecrackers (young folks could never wait until the

big day; if they had crackers in their hands, they had to set match to them), the

nervous whinny of a horse, and the raucous laughter of boys.

Depepe turned to Reynolds, who shrugged and then crossed his arms to hold the

sides of his cloak. In this way he expressed doubt or disapproval or both.

"Problem?"

Jonas was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wiping shaving soap from his

face with the end of the towel laid over his shoulder. He was bare to the waist.

Depepe had seen him that way plenty of times, but the old white crisscrossings of

scars always made him feel a little sick to his stomach.

"Well... I knew we was using the lady's room, I just didn't know the lady came

with it."

"She does." Jonas tossed the towel into the bathroom,

crossed to the bed, and took

his shirt from where it hung on one of the footposts. Beyond him, Coral glanced

up, gave his naked back a single greedy look, then went back to her work once

more. Jonas slipped into his shirt. "How are things at Citigo, Clay?"

"Quiet. But it'll get noisy if certain young vagabundos poke their nosy noses in."

"How many are out there, and how do they set?" "Ten in the days. A dozen at

night. Roy or I are out once every shift, but like I say, it's been quiet."

Jonas nodded, but he wasn't happy. He'd hoped to draw the boys out to Citigo

before now, just as he'd hoped to draw them into a confrontation by vandalizing

their place and killing their pigeons. Yet so far they still hid behind their damned

Hillock. He felt like a man in a field with three young bulls. He's got a red rag, this

would-be torero, and he's napping it for all he's worth, and still the toros refuse to

charge. Why? "The moving operation? How goes that?"

"Like clockwork," Reynolds said. "Four tankers a night, in pairs, the last four

nights. Renfrew's in charge, him of the Lazy Susan. Do you still want to leave half

a dozen as bait?"

"Yar," Jonas said, and there was a knock at the door. Depepe jumped. "Is that—"

"No," Jonas said. "Our friend in the black robe has de-camped. Perhaps he goes to

offer comfort to the Good Man's troops before battle."

Depepe barked laughter at that. By the window, the woman in the nightgown

looked down at her knitting and said nothing. "It's open!" Jonas called.

The man who stepped in was wearing the sombrero, scrape, and sandals of a

farmer or vaquero, but the face was pale and the lock of hair peeking out from

beneath the sombrero's brim was blond. It was Lati-go. A hard man and no

mis-take, but a great improvement over the laughing man in

the black robe, just the same.

“Good to see you, gentlemen,” he said, coming in and closing the door. His

face—dour, frowning—was that of a man who hasn’t seen anything good in

years. Maybe since birth. “Jonas? Are you well? Do things march?”

“I am and they do,” Jonas said. He offered his hand. Lati’go gave it a quick, dry

shake. He didn’t do the same for De’pape or Reynolds, but glanced at Coral instead.

“Long days and pleasant nights, lady.”

“And may you have twice the number, sai Lati’go,” she said without looking up

from her knitting.

Lati’go sat on the end of the bed, produced a sack of tobacco from beneath his

scrape, and began rolling a cigarette.

“I won’t stay long,” he said. He spoke in the abrupt, clipped tones of northern In-

World, where—or so De’pape had heard—reindeer-fucking was still considered the

chief sport. If you ran slower than your sister, that was. “It wouldn’t be wise. I

don’t quite fit in, if one looks closely.”

“No,” Reynolds said, sounding amused. “You don’t.”

Lati’go gave him a sharp glance, then returned his attention to Jonas. “Most of my

party is camped thirty wheels from here, in the forest west of Eye’bolt Canyon . . .

what is that wretched noise inside the canyon, by the way? It frightens the horses.”

“A tiny,” Jonas said.

“It scares the men, too, if they get too close,” Reynolds said. “Best to stay away,

cap’n.”

“How many are you?” Jonas asked.

“A hundred. And well armed.”

“So, it’s said, were Lord Perth’s men.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“Have they seen any fighting?”

“Enough to know what it is,” Lati’go said, and Jonas knew he was lying. Farson

had kept his veterans in their mountain bolt-holes. Here was

a little expenditure

force where no doubt only the sergeants were able to do more with their cocks

than run water through them.

"There are a dozen at Hanging Rock, guarding the tankers your men have brought

so far," Latiago said.

"More than needed, likely."

"I didn't risk coming into this godforsaken shit-splat of a town in order to discuss

my arrangements with you, Jonas."

"Cry your pardon, sai," Jonas replied, but perfunctively. He sat on the floor next to

Coral's rocker and began to roll a smoke of his own. She put her knitting aside and

began to stroke his hair. Deppa didn't know what there was about her that Elfred

found so fascinating—when he himself looked he saw only an ugly bitch with a

big nose and mosquito-bump tit-tles.

"As to the three young men," Latiago said with the air of a fellow going directly to

the heart of the matter. "The Good Man was extremely disturbed to learn there

were visitors from In-World in Mejis. And now you tell me they aren't what they

claim to be. So, just what are they?"

Jonas brushed Coral's hand away from his hair as though it were irrelevant

insect. Undisturbed, she returned to her knitting. "They're not young men but mere

boys, and if their coming here is ka—about which I know Farson concerns himself

deeply—then it may be our ka rather than the Affiliation's."

"Unfortunately, we'll have to forgive enlightening the Good Man with your

theological conclusions," Latiago said. "We've brought raddios, but they're either

broken or can't work at this distance. No one knows which. I hate all such toys,

anyway. The gods laugh at them. We're on our own, my friend. For good or ill."

"No need for Farson to worry unnecessarily," Jonas said. "The Good Man wants

these lads treated as a threat to his plans. I expect Walter told

you the same
thing.”

“Aye. And I haven’t for?got?ten a word. Sai Wal?ter is an un?for?get?table sort of man.”

“Yes,” Lati?go agreed. “He’s the Good Man’s un?der?lin?er. The chief rea?son he came

to you was to un?der?line these boys.”

“And so he did. Roy, tell sai Lati?go about your vis?it to the Sher?iff day be?fore

yes?ter?day.”

De?pape cleared his throat ner?vous?ly. “The sher?iff . . . Av?ery
—”

“I know him, fat as a pig in Full Earth, he is,” Lati?go said. “Go on.” “One of

Av?ery’s deputies car?ried a mes?sage to the three boys as they count?ed horse on the

Drop.” “What mes?sage?”

“Stay out of town on Reap?ing Day; stay off the Drop on Reap?ing Day; best to stay

close to your quar?ters on Reap?ing Day, as Barony folk don’t en?joy see?ing

out?landers, even those they like, when they keep their fes?ti?vals.”

“And how did they take it?”

“They agreed straight away to keep to them?selves on Reap?ing,” De pape said.

“That’s been their habit all along, to be just as agree?able as pie when some?thing’s

asked of em. They know bet?ter, course they do—there’s no more a cus?tom here

against out?landers on Reap?ing than there is any place else. In fact, it’s quite usu?al

to make strangers a part of the mer?ry mak?ing, as I’m sure the boys know. The

idea—”

“—is to make them be?lieve we plan to move on Fair?Day it?self, yes, yes,” Lati?go

fin?ished im?pa?tient?ly. “What I want to know is are they con?vinced? Can you take

them on the day be?fore Reap?ing, as you’ve promised, or will they be wait?ing?”

De?pape and Reynolds looked at Jonas. Jonas reached be?hind him and put his hand

on Coral’s nar?row but not un?in?ter?est?ing thigh. Here it was, he thought. He would

be held to what he said next, and without grace. If he was right, the Big Coffin

Hunters would be thanked and paid ... perhaps bonused, as well. If he was wrong,

they would likely be hung so high and hard that their heads would pop off when

they hit the end of the rope.

"We'll take them easy as birds on the ground," Jonas said. "Treason the charge.

Three young men, all high-bom, in the pay of John Parsons. Shocking stuff. What

could be more indicative of the evil days we live in?"

"One cry of treason and the mob appears?"

Jonas favored Latiago with a winning smile. "As a concept, treason might be a bit of

a reach for the common folk, even when the mob's drunk and the core's been

bought and paid for by the Horsemen's Association. Murder, though ... especially

that of a much loved Mayor—"

Deputy's startled eyes flew to the Mayor's sister.

"What a pity it will be," that lady said, and sighed. "I may be moved to lead the

rabble myself."

Deputy thought he finally understood Elfred's attraction: here was a woman every

bit as cold-blooded as Jonas himself.

"One other matter," Latiago said. "A piece of the Good Man's property was sent

with you for safekeeping. A certain glass ball?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes, indeed. A pretty trifle."

"I understand you left it with the local brujas."

"Yes."

"You should take it back. Soon."

"Don't teach your grandpa to suck eggs," Jonas said, a bit testily. "I'm waiting until

the brats are juggled."

Reynolds murmured curiously, "Have you seen it yourself, said Latiago?"

"Not close up, but I've seen men who have." Latiago paused. "One such ran mad

and had to be shot. The only other time I saw anyone in such condition was thirty

years ago, on the edge of the big desert. 'Twas a hut-dweller who'd been bitten by

a ra?bid coy?ote.“

”Bless the Tur?tle,” Reynolds mut?tered, and tapped his throat three times. He was ter?ri?fied of ra?bies.

”You won’t bless any?thing if the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow gets hold of you,” Lati?go said

grim?ly, and swung his at?ten?tion back to Jonas. ”You’ll want to be even more

care?ful tak?ing it back than you were in giv?ing it over. The old witch-?wom?an’s

like?ly un?der its glam by now.“

”I in?tend to send Rimer and Av?ery. Av?ery ain’t much of a shake, but Rimer’s a trig

boy.“

”I’m afraid that won’t do,” Lati?go said.

”Won’t it?” Jonas said. His hand tight?ened on Coral’s leg and he smiled

un?pleas?ant?ly at Lati?go. ”Per?haps you could tell your ‘um?ble ser vant why it won’t do?“

It was Coral who an?swered. ”Be?cause,” said she, ”when the piece of the Wiz?ard’s

Rain?bow Rhea holds is tak?en back in?to cus?tody, the Chan cel?lor will be busy

ac?com?pa?ny?ing my broth?er to his fi?nal rest?ing place.“

”What’s she talk?ing about, El?dred?“ De?pape asked.

”That Rimer dies, too,” Jonas said. He be?gan to grin. ”An?oth?er foul crime to lay at

the feet of John Far?son’s filthy spy?boys.”

Coral smiled in sweet agree?ment, put her hands over Jonas’s, moved it high?er on

her thigh, and then picked up her knit?ting again.

2

The girl, al?though young, was mar?ried.

The boy, al?though fair, was un?sta?ble.

She met him one night in a re?mote place to tell him their af?fair, sweet as it had

been, must end. He replied that it would nev?er end, it was writ?ten in the stars. She

told him that might be, but at some point the con?stel?la tions had changed. Per?haps

he be?gan to weep. Per?haps she laughed—out of ner?vous?ness, very like?ly.

What?ev?er the cause, such laugh?ter was disas trous?ly timed. He picked up a stone

and dashed out her brains with it. Then, coming to his senses and realizing what he

had done, he sat down with his back against a granite slab, drew her poor battered

head into his lap, and cut his own throat as an owl looked on from a nearby tree.

He died covering her face with kisses, and when they were found, their lips were

sealed together with his life's blood and with hers.

An old story. Every town has its version. The site is usually the local lovers' lane,

or a secluded stretch of riverbank, or the town graveyard. Once the details of what

actually happened have been distorted enough to please the morbidly romantic,

songs are made. These are usually sung by yearning virgins who play guitar or

mandolin and cannot quite stay on key. Chorus tends to include such

lachrymose refrains as My-dear-dear-I-dear-o, There they died together-o.

The Hamble version of this quaint tale featured lovers named Robert and

Francesca, and had happened in the old days, before the world had moved on. The

site of the supposed murder-suicide was the Hamble cemetery, the stone with

which Francesca's brains had been dashed out was a slate marker, and the granite

wall against which Robert had been leaning when he clipped his blowpipe had

been the Thorin mausoleum. (It was doubtful there had been any Thorins in

Hamble or Mejis five generations back, but folk-tales are, at best, generallly no

more than lies set in rhyme.)

True or untrue, the graveyard was considered haunted by the ghosts of the lovers,

who could be seen (it was said) walking hand-in-hand among the markers, covered

with blood and looking wistful. It was thus seldom visited at night, and was a

logical spot for Roland, Cuthbert, Alain, and Susan to meet.

By the time the meeting took place, Roland had begun to feel inexpressibly

worried . . . even des?per?ate. Su?san was the prob?lem—or,
more prop er?ly put,

Su?san's aunt. Even with?out Rhea's poi?sonous let?ter to help
the pro?cess along,

Cordelia's sus?pi?cions of Su?san and Roland had hard?ened in?
to a near cer?tain?ty. On

a day less than a week be?fore the meet?ing in the ceme?tery,
Cordelia had be?gun

shriek?ing at Su?san al?most as soon as she stepped through the
house door with her

bas?ket over her arm.

"Ye've been with him! Ye have, ye bad girl, it's writ?ten all over
yer face!"

Su?san, who had that day been nowhere near Roland, could at
first on?ly gape at her

aunt. "Been with who?"

"Oh, be not coy with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty! Be not
coy, I pray! Who

does all but wig?gle his tongue at ye when he pass?es our door?
Dear?born, that's

who! Dear?born! Dear?born! I'll say it a thou?sand times! Oh,
shame on ye! Shame!

Look at yer trousers! Green from the grass the two of ye have
been rolling in, they

are! I'm sur?prised they're not torn open at the crutch as well!"
By then Aunt Cord

had been near?ly shriek?ing. The veins in her neck stood out
like rope.

Su?san, be?mused, had looked down at the old kha?ki pants she
was wear?ing.

"Aunt, it's paint—don't you see it is? Chet?ta and I've been
mak?ing Fair-?Day

dec?ora?tions up at May?or's House. What's on my bot?tom got
there when Hart

Thorin- not Dear?born but Thorin—came up?on me in the shed
where the

dec?ora?tions and fire?works are stored. He de?cid?ed it was as
good a time and place

as any to have an?oth?er lit?tle wres?tle. He got on top of me,
shot his squirt in?to his

pants again, and went off hap?py. Hum?ming, he was." She
wrin?kled her nose,

al?though the most she felt for Thorin these days was a kind of
sad dis?taste. Her

fear of him had passed.

Aunt Cord, mean?while, had been look?ing at her with glit?tery eyes. For the first

time, Su?san found her?self won?der?ing con?scious?ly about Cordelia's san?ity.

"A like?ly sto?ry," Cordelia whis?pered at last. There were lit?tle beads of per?spi?ra?tion

above her eye?brows, and the nes?tles of blue veins at her tem?ples ticked like clocks.

She even had a smell, these days, no mat?ter if she bathed or not—a ran?cid, acrid

one. "Did ye work it out to?geth?er as ye cud?dled af?ter?ward, thee and him?"

Su?san had stepped for?ward, grabbed her aunt's bony wrist, and clapped it to the

stain on one of her knees. Cordelia cried out and tried to pull away, but Su?san held

fast. She then raised the hand to her aunt's face, hold?ing it there un?til she knew

Cordelia had smelled what was on her palm.

"Does thee smell it. Aunt? Paint! We used it on rice-?pa?per for col?ored lanterns!"

The ten?sion had slow?ly gone out of the wrist in Su?san's hand. The eyes look?ing

in?to hers re?gained a mea?sure of clar?ity. "Aye," she had said at last. "Paint." A

pause. "This time."

Since then, Su?san had all too of?ten turned her head to see a nar?row-?hipped fig?ure

glid?ing af?ter her in the street, or one of her aunt's many friends mark?ing her course

with sus?pi?cious eyes. When she rode on the Drop, she now al?ways had the

sen?sa?tion of be?ing watched. Twice be?fore the four of them came to?geth?er in the

grave?yard, she had agreed to meet Roland and his friends. Both times she had

been forced to break off, the sec?ond at the very last mo?ment. On that oc?ca?sion she

had seen Bri?an Hock?ey's el?dest son watch?ing her in an odd, in?tent way. It had on?ly

been in?tu?ition ... but strong in?tu?ition.

What made mat?ters worse for her was that she was as fran?tic for a meet?ing as

Roland him?self, and not just for palaver. She need?ed to see his face, and to clasp

one of his hands be?tween both of hers. The rest, sweet as it was, could wait, but

she need?ed to see him and touch him; need?ed to make sure he wasn't Just a dream

spun by a lone?ly, fright?ened girl to com fort her?self.

In the end, Maria had helped her—gods bless the lit?tle maid, who per haps

un?der?stood more than Su?san could ev?er guess. It was Maria who had gone to

Cordelia with a note say?ing that Su?san would be spend?ing the night in the guest

wing at Seafront. The note was from Olive Thorin, and in spite of all her

sus?pi?cions, Cordelia could not quite be?lieve it a forgery. As it was not. Olive had

writ?ten it, list?less?ly and with?out ques?tions, when Su?san asked.

“What’s wrong with my niece?” Cordelia had snapped. “She tired, sai. And with

the do?lor de gar?gan?ta.”

“Sore throat? So close be?fore Fair-?Day? Ridicu?lous! I don’t be?lieve it! Su?san’s

nev?er sick!”

“Do?lor de gar?gan?ta,” Maria re?peat?ed, im?pas?sive as on?ly a peas?ant wom?an can be

in the face of dis?be?lief, and with that Cordelia had to be sat?is?fied. Maria her?self

had no idea what Su?san was up to, and that was just the way Su?san liked it.

She’d gone over the bal?cony, mov?ing nim?bly down the fif?teen feet of tan?gled vines

grow?ing up the north side of the build?ing, and through the rear ser?vants’ door in

the wall. There Roland had been wait?ing, and af?ter two warm min?utes with which

we need not con?cern our?selves, they rode dou?ble on Rush?er to the grave?yard,

where Cuth?bert and Alain wait?ed, full of ex?pec?ta?tion and ner?vous hope.

3

Su?san looked first at the placid blond one with the round face, whose name was

not Richard Stock?worth but Alain Johns. Then at the oth?er one—he from whom

she had sensed such doubt of her and per?haps even anger at

her. Cuthbert All?go?od

was his name.

They sat side by side on a fallen grave?stone which had been over?run with ivy,

their feet in a little brook of mist. Susan slid from Rusher's back and approached

them slowly. They stood up. Alain made an In-?World bow, leg out, knee locked,

heel stiffly planted. "Lady," he said. "Long days—"

Now the other was beside him—thin and dark, with a face that would have been

handsome had it not seemed so restless. His dark eyes were really quite beautiful.

"—and pleasant nights," Cuthbert finished, doubling Alain's bow. I he two of them

looked so like comic courtiers in a Fair-?Day sketch that Susan laughed. She

couldn't help herself. Then she curtseyed to them deeply, spreading her arms to

mime the skirts she wasn't wearing. "And may you have twice the number,

gentlemen."

Then they simply looked at each other, three young people who were uncertain

exactly how to proceed. Roland didn't help; he sat astride Kusher and only

watched carefully.

Susan took a tentative step forward, not laughing now. There were still dimples at

the corners of her lips, but her eyes were anxious.

"I hope you don't hate me," she said. "I'd understand it if you did— I've come into

your plans ... and between the three of you, as well—but I couldn't help it." Her

hands were still out at her sides. Now she raised them to Alain and Cuthbert,

palms up. "I love him."

"We don't hate you," Alain said. "Do we, Bert?"

For a terrible moment Cuthbert was silent, looking over Susan's shoulder, seeming

to study the waxing Demon Moon. She felt her heart stop. Then his gaze returned

to her and he gave a smile of such sweetness that a confused but brilliant thought

(if I'd met this one first—, it began) shot through her mind like

a comet.

“Roland’s love is my love,” Cuthbert said. He reached out, took her hands, and

drew her forward so she stood between him and Alain like a sister with her two

brothers. “For we have been friends since we wore cradle-clothes, and we’ll

continue as friends until one of us leaves the path and enters the clearing.” Then he

grinned like a kid. “Maybe we’ll all find the end of the path together, the way

things are going.”

“And soon,” Alain added.

“Just so long,” Susan Delgado finished, “as my Aunt Cordelia doesn’t come along as our champion.”

4

“We are kismet,” Roland said. “We are one from many.”

He looked at each in turn, and saw no disagreement in their eyes. They had

repaired to the mausoleum, and their breath smoked from their mouths and noses.

Roland squatted on his hunkers, looking at the other three, who sat in a line on a

stone meditation bench flanked by skeletal bouquets in stone pots. The floor was

scattered with the petals of dead roses. Cuthbert and Alain, on either side of Susan,

had their arms around her in quite unselfconscious fashion. Again Roland thought

of one sister and two protective brothers.

“We’re greater than we were,” Alain said. “I feel that very strongly.”

“I do, too,” Cuthbert said. He looked around. “And a fine meeting-place, as well.

Especially for such a kismet as ours.”

Roland didn’t smile; repartee had never been his strong suit. “Let’s talk about

what’s going on in Ham-bry,” he said, “and then we’ll talk about the immediate

future.”

“We weren’t sent here on a mission, you know,” Alain said to Susan. “We were

sent by our fathers to get us out of the way, that’s all. Roland expected the end of

a man who is like?ly a co?hort of John Par?son's—"

"'Ex?cit?ed the en?mi?ty of,' " Cuth?bert said. "That's a good phrase. Round. I in?tend to re?mem?ber it and use it at ev?ery op?por?tu?ni?ty."

"Con?trol your?self," Roland said. "I've no de?sire to be here all night."

"Cry your par?don, O great one," Cuth?bert said, but his eyes danced in a de?cid?ed?ly un?re?pen?tant way.

"We came with car?ri?er pi?geons for the send?ing and re?ceiv?ing of mes sages," Alain

went on, "but I think the pi?geons were laid on so our par?ents could be sure we were all right."

"Yes," Cuth?bert said. "What Alain's try?ing to say is that we've been caught by

sur?prise. Roland and I have had ... dis?agree?ments ... about how to go on. He

want?ed to wait. I didn't. I now be?lieve he was right."

"But for the wrong rea?sons," Roland said in a dry tone. "In any case, we've set?tled

our dif?fer?ences."

Su?san was look?ing back and forth be?tween them with some?thing like alarm. What

her gaze set?tled up?on was the bruise on Roland's low?er left jaw, clear?ly vis?ible

even in the faint light which crept through the half?-open sepul?tura door. "Set?tled

them how?"

"It doesn't mat?ter," Roland said. "Far?son in?tends a bat?tle, or per?haps a se?ries of

them, in the Shaved Moun?tains, to the north?west of Gilead. To the forces of the

Af?fil?ia?tion mov?ing to?ward him, he will seem trapped. In a more or?di?nary course of

things, that might even have been true. Far?son in?tends to en?gage them, trap them,

and de?stroy them with the weapons of the Old Peo?ple. These he will drive with oil

from Cit?go. The oil in the tankers we saw, Su?san."

"Where will it be re?fined so Far?son can use it?"

"Some?place west of here along his route," Cuth?bert said. "We think very like?ly the

Vi Castis. Do you know it? It's min?ing coun?try."

"I've heard of it, but I've nev?er ac?tu?al?ly been out of Ham?

bry in my life.“ She

looked lev?el?ly at Roland. ”I think that’s to change soon.“

”There’s a good deal of ma?chin?ery left over from the days of the Old Peo?ple in

those moun?tains,“ Alain said. ”Most is up in the draws and canyons, they say.

Robots and killer lights—ra?zor-?beams, such are called, be? cause they’ll cut you

clean in half if you run in?to them. The gods know what else. Some of it’s

un?doubt?ed?ly just leg?end, but where there’s smoke, there’s of?ten fire. In any case, it

seems the most like?ly spot for re?fin?ing.“

”And then they’d take it on to where Far?son’s wait?ing,“ Cuth? bert said. ”Not that

that part mat?ters to us; we’ve got all we can han?dle right here in Mejis.“

”I’ve been wait?ing in or?der to get it all,“ Roland said. ”Ev?ery bit of their damned

plun?der.“

”In case you haven’t no?ticed, our friend is just a wee nub?bin am?bi tious,“ Cuth?bert

said, and winked.

Roland paid no at?ten?tion. He was look?ing in the di?rec?tion of Eye?bolt Canyon.

There was no noise from there this night; the wind had shift?ed on?to its au?tumn

course and away from town. ”If we can fire the oil, the rest will go up with it... and

the oil is the most im?por?tant thing, any?way. I want to de? stroy it, then I want to get

the hell out of here. The four of us.“

”They mean to move on Reap?ing Day, don’t they?“ Su?sana asked.

”Oh yes, it seems so,“ Cuth?bert said, then laughed. It was a rich, in fec?tious

sound—the laugh?ter of a child—and as he did it, he rocked back and forth and

held his stom?ach as a child would.

Su?sana looked puz?zled. ”What? What is it?“

”I can’t tell,“ he said, chortling. ”It’s too rich for me. I’ll laugh all the way through

it, and Roland will be an?noyed. You do it, Al. Tell Su?sana about our vis?it from

Deputy Dave.”

"He came out to see us at the Bar K," Alain said, smiling himself. "Talked to us

like an uncle. Told us Ham-bry-folk don't care for outsiders at their Fairs, and we'd

best keep right to our place on the day of the full moon."

"That's insane!" Susan spoke indignantly, as one is apt to when one hears one's

home-town unjustly maligned. "We welcome strangers to our fairs, so we do, and

always have! We're not a bunch of... of savages!"

"Soft, soft," Cuthbert said, giggling. "We know that, but Deputy Dave don't know

we know, do he? He knows his wife makes the best white tea for miles around,

and after that Dave's pretty much at sea. Sheriff Herk knows a little more, I should

judge, but not much."

"The pains they've taken to warn us off means two things," Roland said. "The first

is that they intend to move on Reaping Fair-Day, just as you said, Susan. The

second is that they think they can steal Parson's goods right out from under our noses."

"And then perhaps blame us for it afterward," Alain said.

She looked curiously from one to the other, then said: "What have you planned, then?"

"To destroy what they've left at Citigo as bait of our own and then to strike them

where they gather," Roland said quietly. "That's Hanging Rock. At least half the

tankers they mean to take west are there already. They'll have a force of men. As

many as two hundred, perhaps, although I think it will turn out to be less. I intend

that all these men should die."

"If they don't, we will," Alain said.

"How can the four of us kill two hundred soldiers?"

"We can't. But if we can start one or two of the clustered tankers burning, we think

there'll be an explosion—maybe a fearful one. The surviving soldiers will be

terrified, and the surviving leaders infuriated. They'll see us, because we'll let

our?elves be seen ...”

Alain and Cuthbert were watching him breathlessly. The rest they had either been

told or had guessed, but this part was the counsel Roland had, until now, kept to himself.

“What then?” she asked, frightened. “What then?”

“I think we can lead them into Eyebolt Canyon,” Roland said. “I think we can lead them into the thinny.”

5

Thunderstruck silence greeted this. Then, not without respect, Susan said:

“You’re mad.”

“No,” Cuthbert said thoughtfully. “He’s not. You’re thinking about that little cut in

the canyon wall, aren’t you, Roland? The one just before the jog in the canyon floor.”

Roland nodded. “Four could scramble up that way without too much trouble. At

the top, we’ll pile a fair amount of rock. Enough to start a landslide down on any that should try following us.”

“That’s horrible,” Susan said.

“It’s survival,” Alain replied. “If they’re allowed to have the oil and put it to use,

they’ll slaughter every Affiliation man that gets in range of their weapons. The

Good Man takes no prisoners.”

“I didn’t say wrong, only horrible.”

They were silent for a moment, four children contemplating the murders of two

hundred men. Except they wouldn’t all be men; many (perhaps even most) would

be boys roughly their own ages.

At last she said, “Those not caught in your rockslide will only ride back out of the canyon again.”

“No, they won’t.” Alain had seen the lay of the land and now under stood the

matter almost completely. Roland was nodding, and there was a trace of a smile

on his mouth.

“Why not?”

"The brush at the front of the canyon. We're go?ing to set it on fire, aren't we,

Roland? And if the pre?vail?ing winds are pre?vail?ing that day ... the smoke ..."

"It'll drive them the rest of the way in," Roland agreed. "In?to the thin?ny."

"How will you set the brush-?pile alight?" Su?san asked. "I know it's dry, but sure?ly

you won't have time to use a sul?fur match or your flint and steel."

"You can help us there," Roland said, "just as you can help us set the tankers

alight. We can't count on touch?ing off the oil with just our guns, you know; crude

oil is a lot less volatile than peo?ple might think. And Sheemie's go?ing to help you,

I hope."

"Tell me what you want."

6

They talked an?oth?er twen?ty min?utes, re?fin?ing the plan sur?pris?ing?ly lit?tle— all of

them seemed to un?der?stand that if they planned too much and things changed

sud?den?ly, they might freeze. Ka had swept them in?to this; it was per?haps best that

they count on ka—and their own courage—to sweep them back out again.

Cuth?bert was re?luc?tant to in?volve Sheemie, but fi?nal?ly went along— the boy's part

would be min?imal, if not ex?act?ly low-?risk, and Roland agreed that they could take

him with them when they left Mejis for good. A par?ty of rive was as fine as a par?ty

of four, he said.

"All right," Cuth?bert said at last, then turned to Su?san. "It ought to be you or me

who talks to him."

"I will."

"Make sure he un?der?stands not to tell Coral Thorin so much as a word," Cuth?bert

said. "It isn't that the May?or's her broth?er; I just don't trust that bitch."

"I can give ye a bet?ter rea?son than Hart not to trust her," Su?san said. "My aunt says

she's tak?en up with El?dred Jonas. Poor Aunt Cord! She's had

the worst sum?mer of

her life. Nor will the fall be much bet?ter, I wot. Folk will call her the aunt of a traitor.”

“Some will know bet?ter,” Alain said. “Some al?ways do.”

“May?hap, but my Aunt Cordelia’s the sort of wom?an who nev?er hears good gos?sip.

No more does she speak it. She fan?cied Jonas her?self, ye ken.”

Cuth?bert was thun?der?struck. “Fan?cied Jonas! By all the fiding gods! Can you

imag?ine it! Why, if they hung folk for bad taste in love, your aun?tie would go

ear?ly, wouldn’t she?”

Su?san gig?gled, hugged her knees, and nod?ded.

“It’s time we left,” Roland said. “If some?thing chances that Su?san needs to know

right away, we’ll use the red stone in the rock wall at Green Heart.”

“Good,” Cuth?bert said. “Let’s get out of here. The cold in this place eats in?to the

bones.”

Roland stirred, stretch?ing life back in?to his legs. “The im?por?tant thing is that

they’ve de?cid?ed to leave us free while they round up and run. That’s our edge, and

it’s a good one. And now—“

Alain’s quiet voice stopped him. “There’s an?oth?er mat?ter. Very im?por?tant.”

Roland sank back down on his hun?kers, look?ing at Alain curious?ly.

”The witch.”

Su?san start?ed, but Roland on?ly barked an im?pa?tient laugh. ”She doesn’t fig?ure in

our busi?ness, Al—I can’t see how she could. I don’t be?lieve she’s a part of Jonas’s

con?spir?acy—“

”Nei?ther do I,” Alain said.

”—and Cuth?bert and I per?sua?ed her to keep her mouth shut about Su?san and me.

If we hadn’t, her aunt would have raised the roof by now.”

”But don’t you see?” Alain asked. ”Who Rhea might have told isn’t re?al?ly the

ques?tion. The ques?tion is how she knew in the first place.”

”It’s pink,” Su?san said abrupt?ly. Her hand was on her hair, fingers touch?ing the

place where the cut ends had begun to grow out.

"What's pink?" Alain asked.

"The moon," she said, and then shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know what

I'm talking about. Brainless as Pinch and Jilly, I am ... Roland? What's wrong?

What ails thee?"

For Roland was no longer hungering; he had collapsed into a loose sitting position

on the petal-strewn stone floor. He looked like a young man trying not to faint.

Outside the mausoleum there was a bony rattle of fall leaves and the cry of a

nightjar.

"Dear gods," he said in a low voice. "It can't be. It can't be true." His eyes met

Cuthbert's.

All the humor had washed out of the latter young man's face, leaving a ruthless

and calculating bedrock his own mother might not have recognized ... or might

not have wanted to.

"Pink," Cuthbert said. "Isn't that interesting—the same word your father happened

to mention just before we left, Roland, wasn't it? He warned us about the pink one.

We thought it was a joke. Almost."

"Oh!" Alain's eyes flew wide open. "Oh, fuck!" he blurted. He realized what he

had said while sitting leg-to-leg with his best friend's lover and clapped his hands

over his mouth. His cheeks flamed red.

Susan barely noticed. She was staring at Roland in growing fear and confusion.

"What?" she asked. "What is it you know? Tell me! Tell me!"

"I'd like to hypnotize you again, as I did that day in the willow grove," Roland

said. "I want to do it right now, before we talk of this more and drag mud across

what you remember."

Roland had reached into his pocket while she was speaking. Now he took out a

shell, and it began to dance across the back of his hand once more. Her eyes went

to it at once, like steel drawn to a magnet.

"May I?" he asked. "By your leave, dear."

"Aye, as ye will." Her eyes were widening and growing glassy. "I don't know why

ye think this time should be any different, but. . ." She stopped talking, her eyes

continuing to follow the dance of the shell across Roland's hand. When he stopped

moving it and clasped it in his fist, her eyes closed. Her breath was soft and

regular.

"Gods, she went like a stone," Cuthbert whispered, amazed. "She's been

hypnotized before. By Rhea, I think." Roland paused. Then: "Susan, do you hear

me?"

"Aye, Roland, I hear ye very well." "I want you to hear another voice, too."

"Whose?"

Roland beckoned to Alain. If anyone could break through the block in Susan's

mind (or find a way around it), it would be him.

"Mine, Susan," Alain said, coming to Roland's side. "Do you know it?" She smiled

with her eyes closed. "Aye, you're Alain. Richard Stockworth that was."

"That's right." He looked at Roland with nervous, questioning eyes— What shall I

ask her?—but for a moment Roland didn't reply. He was in two other places, both

at the same time, and hearing two different voices.

Susan, by the stream in the willow grove: She says, "Aye, lovely, just so, it's a

good girl y'are, " then everything's pink.

His father, in the yard behind the Great Hall: It's the grapefruit. By which I mean

it's the pink one.

The pink one.

7

Their horses were saddled and loaded; the three boys stood before them,

outwardly stolid, inwardly feverish to be gone. The road, and the mysterious that

lie along it, calls out to none as it calls to the young.

They were in the courtyard which lay east of the Great Hall, not far from where

Roland had best?ed Cort, set?ing all these things in mo?tion. It was ear?ly morn?ing,

the sun not yet risen, the mist ly?ing over the green fields in gray rib?bons. At a

dis?tance of about twen?ty paces, Cuth?bert's and Alain's fa?thers stood sen?try with

their legs apart and their hands on the butts of their guns. It was un?like?ly that

Marten (who had for the time be ing ab?sent?ed him?self from the palace, and, so far

as any knew, from Gilead it?self) would mount any sort of at?tack on them—not

here—but it wasn't en?tire?ly out of the ques?tion, ei?ther.

So it was that on?ly Roland's fa?ther spoke to them as they mount?ed up to be?gin

their ride east to Mejis and the Out?er Arc.

"One last thing," he said as they ad?just?ed their sad?dle girths. "I doubt you'll see

any?thing that ouch?es on our in?ter?ests—not in Mejis—but I'd have you keep an

eye out for a col?or of the rain?bow. The Wiz?ard's Rain?how, that is." He chuck?led,

then added: "It's the grape?fruit. By which I mean it's the pink one."

"Wiz?ard's Rain?bow is just a fairy?-tale," Cuth?bert said, smil?ing in re?sponse to

Steven's smile. Then—per?haps it was some?thing in Steven De?schain's

eyes—Cuth?bert's smile fal?tered. "Isn't it?"

"Not all the old sto?ries are true, but I think that of Maer?lyn's Rain?bow is," Steven

replied. "It's said that once there were thir?teen glass balls in it—one for each of the

Twelve Guardians, and one rep?re?sent?ing the nexus?-point of the Beams."

"One for the Tow?er," Roland said in a low voice, feel?ing goose?flesh. "One for the

Dark Tow?er."

"Aye, Thir?teen it was called when I was a boy. We'd tell sto?ries about the black

ball around the fire some?times, and scare our?selves sil?ly . . . un less our fa?thers

caught us at it. My own da said it wasn't wise to talk about Thir?teen, for it might

hear its name called and roll your way. But Black Thir?teen

doesn't matter to you

three ... not now, at least. No, it's the pink one. Maerlyn's Grapefruit."

It was impossible to tell how serious he was ... or if he was serious at all.

"If the other balls in the Wizard's Rainbow did exist, most are broken now. Such

things never stay in one place or one pair of hands for long, you know, and even

enchanted glass has a way of breaking. Yet at least three or four bends of the

Rainbow may still be rolling around this sad world of ours. The blue, almost

certainly. A desert tribe of slow mutants—the Total Hogs, they called

themselves—had that one less than fifty years ago, although it's slipped from sight

again since. The green and the orange are reputed to be in Lud and Dis,

respectively. And, just maybe, the pink one."

"What exactly do they do?" Roland asked. "What are they good for?"

"For seeing. Some colors of the Wizard's Rainbow are reputed to look into the

future. Others look into the other worlds—those where the demons live, those

where the Old People are supposed to have gone when they left our world. These

may also show the location of the secret doors which pass between the worlds.

Other colors, they say, can look far in our own world, and see things people would

as soon keep secret. They never see the good; only the ill. How much of this is

true and how much is myth no one knows for sure."

He looked at them, his smile fading.

"But this we do know: John Farson is said to have a talisman, some thing that

glows in his tent late at night ... sometimes before battles, sometimes before large

movements of troop and horse, sometimes before movements of decisions are

announced. And it glows pink."

"Maybe he has an electric light and puts a pink scarf over it when he prays,"

Cuthbert said. He looked around at his friends, a little defencelessly. "I'm not joking;

there are people who do that."

"Perhaps," Roland's father said. "Perhaps that's all it is, or something like. But

perhaps it's a good deal more. All I can say of my own knowledge is that he keeps

beating us, he keeps slipping away from us, and he keeps turning up where he's

least expected. If the magic is in him and not in some talisman he owns, gods help

the Affiliation."

"We'll keep an eye out, if you like," Roland said, "but Parsons's in the north or

west. We're going east." As if his father did not know this.

"If it's a bend o' the Rainbow," Steven replied, "it could be anywhere—east or

south's as likely as west. He can't keep it with him all the time, you see. No matter

how much it would ease his mind and heart to do so. No one can."

"Why not?"

"Because they're alive, and hungry," Steven said. "One begins using em; one ends

being used by em. If Farson has a piece of the Rainbow, he'll send it away and call

it back only when he needs it. He understands the risk of losing it, but he also

understands the risk of keeping it too long."

There was a question which the other two, constrained by politeness, couldn't ask.

Roland could, and did. "You are serious about this. Dad? It's not just a leg-pull, is it?"

"I'm sending you away at an age when many boys still don't sleep well if their

mothers don't kiss them goodnight," Steven said. "I expect to see all three of you

again, alive and well—Mejis is a lovely, quiet place, or was when I was a

boy—but I can't be sure of it. As things are these days, no one can be sure of

anything. I wouldn't send you away with a joke and a laugh. I'm surprised you

think it."

"Cry your par?don," Roland said. An un?easy peace had descend?ed be?tween him and

his fa?ther, and he would not rup?ture it. Still, he was wild to be off. Push?er jiggled

be?neath him, as if sec?ond?ing that.

"I don't ex?pect you boys to see Maer?lyn's glass . . . but I didn't ex?pect to be see?ing

you off at four?teen with re?volvers tucked in your bed rolls, ei?ther. Ka's at work

here, and where ka works, any?thing is pos?si?ble."

Slow?ly, slow?ly, Steven took off his hat, stepped back, and swept them a bow. "Go

in peace, boys. And re?turn in health."

"Long days and pleas?ant nights, sai," Alain said.

"Good for?tune," Cuth?bert said.

"I love you," Roland said.

Steven nod?ded. "Thankee-?sai—I love you, too. My bless?ings, boys." He said this

last in a loud voice, and the oth?er two men—Robert All?go?od and Christo?pher

Johns, who had been known in the days of his sav?age youth as Burn?ing

Chris—added their own bless?ings.

So the three of them rode to?ward their end of the Great Road, while sum?mer lay

all about them, breath?less as a gasp. Roland looked up and saw some?thing that

made him for?get all about the Wiz?ard's Rain?bow. It was his moth?er, lean?ing out of

her apart?ment's bed?room win?dow: the oval of her face sur?round?ed by the time?less

gray stone of the cas?tle's west wing. There were tears cours?ing down her cheeks,

but she smiled and lift?ed one hand in a wide wave. Of the three of them, on?ly

Roland saw her.

He didn't wave back.

8

"Roland!" An el?bow struck him in the ribs, hard enough to dis?pel these mem?ories,

bril?liant as they were, and re?turn him to the present. It was Cuth?bert. "Do

some?thing, if you mean to! Get us out of this dead?house be?fore I shiv?er the skin

right off my bones!"

Roland put his mouth close by Alain's ear. "Be ready to help me."

Alain nodded.

Roland turned to Susan. "After the first time we were together, you went to the stream in the grove."

"Aye."

"You cut some of your hair."

"Aye." That same dreamy voice. "So I did."

"Would you have cut it all?"

"Aye, every lick and lock."

"Do you know who told you to cut it?"

A long pause. Roland was about to turn to Alain when she said, "Rhea." Another

pause. "She wanted to fiddle me up."

"Yes, but what happened later? What happened while you stood in the doorway?"

"Oh, and something else happened before."

"What?"

"I fetched her wood," said she, and said no more.

Roland looked at Cuthbert, who shrugged. Alain spread his hands. Roland thought

of asking the latter boy to step forward, and judged it still wasn't quite time.

"Never mind the wood for now," he said, "or all that came before. We'll talk of

that later, maybe, but not just yet. What happened as you were leaving? What did

she say to you about your hair?"

"Whispered in my ear. And she had a Jesus-man."

"Whispered what?"

"I don't know. That part is pink."

Here it was. He nodded to Alain. Alain bit his lip and stepped forward. He looked

frightened, but as he took Susan's hands in his own and spoke to her, his voice was

calm and soothing.

"Susan? It's Alain Johns. Do you know me?"

"Aye—Richard Stockworth that was."

"What did Rhea whisper in your ear?"

A frown, faint as a shadow on an overcast day, creased her brow. "I can't see. It's

pink."

"You don't need to see," Alain said. "Seeing's not what we want right now. Close

your eyes so you can't do it at all."

"They are closed," she said, a trifling pettishly. She's frightened, Roland thought. He

felt an urge to tell Alain to stop, to wake her up, and restrained it.

"The ones inside," Alain said. "The ones that look out from memory. Close those,

Susan. Close them for your father's sake, and tell me not what you see but what

you hear. Tell me what she said."

Chillingly, unexpectedly, the eyes in her face opened as she closed those in her

mind. She stared at Roland, and through him, with the eyes of an ancient statue.

Roland bit back a scream.

"You were in the doorway, Susan?" Alain asked.

"Aye. So we both were."

"Be there again."

"Aye." A dreaming voice. Faint but clear. "Even with my eyes closed I can see—the

moon's light. 'Tis as big as a grapefruit."

It's the grapefruit, Roland thought. By which I mean, it's the pink one.

"And what do you hear? What does she say?"

"No, I say." The faintly petulant voice of a little girl. "First I say, Alain. I say 'And

is our business done?' and she says 'Mayhap there's one more little thing,' and then

... then..."

Alain squeezed gently down on her hands, using whatever it was he had in his

own, his touch, sending it into her. She tried feebly to pull back, but he wouldn't

let her. "Then what? What next?"

"She has a little silver medal."

"Yes?"

"She leans close and asks if I hear her. I can smell her breath. It reeks of garlic.

And other things, even worse." Susan's face wrinkled in distaste. "I say I hear her.

Now I can see. I see the medal she has."

"Very well, Susan," Alain said. "What else do you see?"

"Rhea. She looks like a skull in the moonlight. A skull with hair."

"Gods," Cuthbert muttered, and crossed his arms over his

chest.

"She says I should listen. I say I will listen. She says I should obey. I say I will

obey. She says 'Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are.' She's stroking my hair.

All the time. My braid." Su?san raised a dream?ing, drown?ing hand, pale in the

shadows of the crypt, to her blonde hair. "And then she says there's something I'm

to do when my virginity's over. 'Wait,' she says, 'until he's asleep beside ye, then

cut yer hair off yer head. Every strand. Right down to yer very skull.' "

The boys looked at her in mounting horror as her voice became Rhea's—the

growling, whining cadences of the old woman of the Coos. Even the face—except

for the coldly dream?ing eyes—had become a hag's face.

" 'Cut it all, girl, every whore's strand of it, aye, and go back to him as bald as ye

came from yer mother! See how he likes ye then!' "

She fell silent. Alain turned his pallid face to Roland. His lips were trembling, but

still he held her hands.

"Why is the moon pink?" Roland asked. "Why is the moon pink when you try to

remember?"

"It's her glam." Su?san seemed almost surprised, almost gay. Confiding. "She

keeps it under her bed, so she does. She doesn't know I saw it."

"Are you sure?"

"Aye," Su?san said, then added simply: "She would have killed me if she knew."

She giggled, shocking them all. "Rhea has the moon in a box under her bed." She

lilted this in the singsong voice of a small child.

"A pink moon," Roland said.

"Aye."

"Under her bed."

"Aye." This time she did pull her hands free of Alain's. She made a circle with

them in the air, and as she looked up at it, a dreadful expression of greed passed

over her face like a cramp. "I should like to have it, Roland. So I should. Love?ly

moon! I saw it when she sent me for the wood. Through her win?dow. She looked

... young." Then, once again: "I sh'd like to have such a thing."

"No—you wouldn't. But it's un?der her bed?"

"Aye, in a mag?ic place she makes with pass?es."

"She has a piece of Maer?lyn's Rain?bow," Cuth?bert said in a won?der ing voice.

"The old bitch has what your da told us about—no won?der she knows all she

does!"

"Is there more we need?" Alain asked. "Her hands have got?ten very cold. I don't

like hav?ing her this deep. She's done well, but. . ."

"I think we're done."

"Shall I tell her to for?get?"

Roland shook his head at once—they were ka?tet, for good or ill. He took hold of

her fin?gers, and yes, they were cold.

"Su?san?"

"Aye, dear."

"I'm go?ing to say a rhyme. When I fin?ish, you'll re?mem?ber ev?ery thing, as you did

be?fore. All right?"

She smiled and closed her eyes again. "Bird and bear and hare and fish. . ."

Smil?ing, Roland fin?ished, "Give my love her fond?est wish."

Her eyes opened. She smiled. "You," she said again, and kissed him. "Still you,

Roland. Still you, my love."

Un?able to help him?self, Roland put his arms around her.

Cuth?bert looked away. Alain looked down at his boots and cleared his throat.

9

As they rode back to?ward Seafront, Su?san with her arms around Roland's waist,

she asked: "Will you take the glass from her?"

"Best leave it where it is for now. It was left in her safe?keep?ing by Jonas, on be?half

of Par?son, I have no doubt. It's to be sent west with the rest of the plun?der; I've no

doubt of that, ei?ther. We'll deal with it when we deal with the tankers and Par?son's

men."

"Ye'd take it with us?"

"Take it or break it. I sup?pose I'd rather take it back to my fa?

ther, but that has its

own risks. We'll have to be careful. It's a powerful glam."

"Suppose she sees our plans? Suppose she warns Jonas or Kim?ba Rimer?"

"If she doesn't see us coming to take away her precious toy, I don't think she'll

mind our plans one way or the other. I think we've put a scare in?to her, and if the

ball has really gotten a hold on her, watching in it's what she'll most?ly want to do

with her time now."

"And hold on?to it. She'll want to do that, too."

"Aye."

Rusher was walking along a path through the sea?cliff woods. Through the thin?ning

branches they could glimpse the ivied gray wall surrounding May?or's House and

hear the rhythmic roar of waves breaking on the shining?be? low.

"You can get in safe, Susan?"

"No fear."

"And you know what you and Sheemie are to do?"

"Aye. I feel better than I have in ages. It's as if my mind is finally clear of some old shadow."

"If so, it's Alain you have to thank. I couldn't have done it on my own."

"There's magic in his hands."

"Yes." They had reached the servants' door. Susan dismount?ed with fluid ease. He

stepped down himself and stood beside her with an arm around her waist. She was looking up at the moon.

"Look, it's fat?tened enough so you can see the beginning of the De mon's face.

Does thee see it?"

A blade of nose, a bone of grin. No eye yet, but yes, he saw it.

"It used to terrify me when I was little." Susan was whispering now, mindful of

the house behind the wall. "I'd pull the blind when the De?mon was full. I was

afraid that if he could see me, he'd reach down and take me up to where he was

and eat me." Her lips were trembling. "Children are silly, aren't they?"

"Some?times." He hadn't been afraid of De?mon Moon him?self as a small child, but

he was afraid of this one. The fu?ture seemed so dark, and the way through to the

light so slim. "I love thee, Su?san. With all my heart, I do."

"I know. And I love thee." She kissed his mouth with gen?tle open lips. Put his

hand on her breast for a mo?ment, then kissed the warm palm. He held her, and she

looked past him at the ripen?ing moon.

"A week un?til the Reap," she said. "Fin de ano is what the va?que?ros and

labradores call it. Do they call it so in your land?"

"Near enough," Roland said. "It's called clos?ing the year. Wom?en go about giv?ing

pre?serves and kiss?es."

She laughed soft?ly against his shoul?der. "Per?haps I'll not find things so dif?fer?ent,

af?ter all."

"You must save all your best kiss?es for me."

"I will."

"What?ev?er comes, we'll be to?geth?er," he said, but above them, De mon Moon

grinned in?to the star?ry dark above the Clean Sea, as if he knew a dif?fer?ent fu?ture.

CHAP?TER VI

CLOS?ING THE YEAR

1

So now comes to Mejis fin de ano, known in to?ward the cen?ter of Mid-?World as

clos?ing the year. It comes as it has a thou?sand times be?fore ... or ten thou?sand, or a

hun?dred thou?sand. No one can tell for sure; the world has moved on and time has

grown strange. In Mejis their say?ing is "Time is a face on the wa?ter."

In the fields, the last of the pota?toes are be?ing picked by men and wom?en who

wear gloves and their heav?iest scrapes, for now the wind has turned firm?ly,

blow?ing east to west, blow?ing hard, and al?ways there's the smell of salt in the

chilly air—a smell like tears. Los campesinos har?vest the fi?nal rows cheer?ful?ly

enough, talk?ing of the things they'll do and the ca?pers they'll

cut at Reap?ing Fair,

but they feel all of au?tumn's old sad ness in the wind; the go?
ing of the year. It runs

away from them like wa?ter in a stream, and al?though none
speak of it, all know it
very well.

In the or?chards, the last and high?est of the ap?ples are picked
by laugh ing young

men (in these not-?quite-?gales, the fi?nal days of pick?ing be?
long on?ly to them) who

bob up and down like crow's nest look?outs. Above them, in
skies which hold a

bril?liant, cloud?less blue, squadrons of geese fly south, call?ing
their rusty adieux.

The small fish?ing boats are pulled from the wa?ter; their hulls
are scraped and

paint?ed by singing own?ers who most?ly work stripped to the
waist in spite of the

chill in the air. They sing the old songs as they work—

I am a man of the bright blue sea,

All I see, all I see,

I am a man of the Barony,

All I see is mine-?o!

I am a man of the bright blue hay,

All I say, all I say,

Un?til my nets are full I stay

All I say is fine-?o!

—and some?times a lit?tle cask of graf is tossed from dock to
dock. On the bay it?self

on?ly the large boats now re?main, pac?ing about the big cir?
cles which mark their

dropped nets as a work?ing dog may pace around a flock of
sheep. At noon the bay

is a rip?pling sheet of au?tumn fire and the men on the boats sit
cross-?legged, eat?ing

their lunch?es, and know that all they see is theirs-?o ... at least
un?til the gray gales

of au?tumn come swarm?ing over the hori?zon, cough?ing out
their gusts of sleet and
snow.

Clos?ing, clos?ing the year.

Along the streets of Ham?bry, the Reap-?lights now bum at
night, and the hands of

the stuffy-?guys are paint?ed red. Reap-?charms hang ev?ery
where, and al?though

women of?ten kiss and are kissed in the streets and in both
market?places—of?ten by

men they do not know—sexual in?ter?course has come to an
almost com?plete halt. It

will re?sue (with a bang, you might say) on Reap-?Night.
There will be the usual

crop of Full Earth babies the fol?low?ing year as a re?sult.

On the Drop, the horses gal?lop wildly, as if un?der?stand?ing
(very like?ly they do)

that their time of free?dom is com?ing to an end. They swoop
and then stand with

their faces point?ing west when the wind gusts, show ing their
asses to win?ter. On

the ranches, porch-?nets are tak?en down and shut?ters re?
hung. In the huge ranch

kitchens and small?er farmhouse kitchens, no one is steal?ing
Reap-?kisses, and no

one is even think?ing about sex. This is the time of putting up
and lay?ing by, and

the kitchens fume with steam and pulse with heat from be?fore
dawn un?til long

af?ter dark. There is the smell of ap?ples and beets and beans
and sharp?root and

cur?ing strips of meat. Women work cease?less?ly all day and
then sleep walk to bed,

where they lie like corpses un?til the next dark morn?ing calls
them back to their

kitchens.

Leaves are burned in town yards, and as the week goes on and
Old De?mon's face

shows ev?er more clear?ly, red-?hand?ed stuffy-?guys are
thrown on the pyres more

and more fre?quent?ly. In the fields, corn?shucks flare like
torch?es, and of?ten stuffies

bum with them, their red hands and white-?cross eyes rip?pling
in the heat. Men

stand around these fires, not speak?ing, their faces solemn. No
one will say what

ter?ri?ble old ways and un?speak?able old gods are be?ing pro?
pi?ti?ated by the burn?ing of

the stuffy-?guys, but they all know well enough. From time to
time one of these

men will whis?per two words un?der his breath: chary?ou tree.

They are clos?ing, clos?ing, clos?ing the year.

The streets rattle with fire?crackers—and some?times with a

hefty?er “big-?hang” that

makes even placid carthors?es rear in their traces—and echo with the laugh?ter of

chil?dren. On the porch of the mer?can?tile and across the street at the Trav?ellers’

Rest, kiss?es—some?times hu?mid?ly open and with much sweet lash?ing of

tongues—are ex?changed, but Coral Thorin’s whores (“cot?ton-?gillies” is what the

airy-?fairy ones like Gert Mog?gins like to call them?selves) are bored. They will

have lit?tle cus?tom this week.

This is not Year’s End, when the win?ter?logs will bum and Mejis will be bam-

dances from one end to the oth?er . . . and yet it is. This is the re?al year’s end,

chary?ou tree, and ev?ery?one, from Stan?ley Ruiz stand?ing at the bar be?neath The

Romp to the far?thest of Fran Lengyll’s va?que?ros out on the edge of the Bad Grass,

knows it. There is a kind of echo in the bright air, a yearn?ing for oth?er places in

the blood, a lone?li?ness in the heart that sings like the wind.

But this year there’s some?thing else, as well: a sense of wrong?ness that no one can

quite voice. Folks who nev?er had a night?mare in their lives will awake scream?ing

with them dur?ing the week of fin de ano; men who con?sider them?selves peaceful

will find them?selves not on?ly in fist-?fights but in?sti?gat?ing them; dis?con?tent?ed boys

who would on?ly have dreamed of run?ning away in oth?er years will this year

ac?tu?al?ly do it, and most will not come back af?ter the first night spent sleep?ing raw.

There is a sense—inar?tic?ulate but very much there—that things have gone amiss

this sea?son. It is the clos?ing of the year; it is al?so the clos?ing of the peace. For it is

here, in the sleepy Out-?World Barony of Mejis, that Mid-?World’s last great

con?flict will short?ly be?gin; it is from here that the blood will be?gin to flow. In two

years, no more, the world as it has been will be swept away. It starts here. From its

field of roses, the Dark Tower cries out in its beast's voice.

Time is a face on the

water.

2

Coral Thorin was coming down the High Street from the Bayview Hotel when she

spied Sheemie, leading Caprichoso and heading in the opposite direction. The boy

was singing "Careless Love" in a voice both high and sweet. His progress was

slow; the barrels slung over Capi's back were half again as large as the ones he had

carried up to the Coos not long before.

Coral hailed her boy-of-all-work cheerily enough. She had reason to be cheery;

Elfred Jonas had no use for fin de annoistenance. And for a man with a bad leg,

he could be very inventive.

"Sheemie!" she called. "Where go ye Seafront?"

"Aye," Sheemie said. "I've got the graf them asked for. All parties come Reaping

Fair, aye, tons of em. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, drink graf to cool off a lot! How

pretty you look, sai Thorin, cheeks all pinky-pink, so they are."

"Oh, law! How kind of you to say, Sheemie!" She favored him with a dazling

smile. "Go on, now, you flatterer—don't linger."

"Noey-no, off I go."

Coral stood watching after him and smiling. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, Sheemie

had said. About the dancing Coral didn't know, but she was sure this year's

Reaping would be hot, all right. Very hot indeed.

3

Miguel met Sheemie at Seafront's archway, gave him the look of lofty contempt

he reserved for the lower orders, then pulled the cork from first one barrel and then

the other. With the first, he only sniffed from the bung; at the second, he stuck his

thumb in and then sucked it thoughtfully. With his wrinkled cheeks hollowed

inward and his toothless old mouth working, he looked like an ancient bearded

ba?by.

“Tasty, ain’t it?” Sheemie asked. “Tasty as a pasty, ain’t it, good old Miguel, been

here a thou?sand years?”

Miguel, still suck?ing his thumb, fa?vored Sheemie with a sour look. “An?dale.

An?dale, sim?plon. ”

Sheemie led his mule around the house to the kitchen. Here the breeze off the

ocean was sharp and shiv?er?some. He waved to the wom?en in the kitchen, but not a

one waved back; like?ly they didn’t even see him. A pot boiled on ev?ery trink of the

enor?mous stove, and the wom?en— work?ing in loose long-?sleeved cot?ton gar?ments

like shifts and wear?ing their hair tied up in bright?ly col?ored clouts—moved about

like phan?toms glimpsed in fog.

Sheemie took first one bar?rel from Capi’s back, then the oth?er. Grunt ing, he

car?ried them to the huge oak tank by the back door. He opened the tank’s lid, bent

over it, and then backed away from the eye-?wa?ter?ing?ly strong smell of el?der?ly

graf.

“Whew!” he said, hoist?ing the first bar?rel. “Ye could get drunk just on

the smell o’ that lot!”

He emp?tied in the fresh graf, care?ful not to spill. When he was fin ished, the tank

was pret?ty well topped up. That was good, for on Reap?ing Night, ap?ple-?beer

would flow out of the kitchen taps like wa?ter.

He slipped the emp?ty bar?rels in?to their car?ri?ers, looked in?to the kitchen once more

to be sure he wasn’t be?ing ob?served (he wasn’t; Coral’s sim?ple-?mind?ed tav?ern-?boy

was the last thing on any?one’s minds that morn?ing), and then led Capi not back the

way they’d come but along a path which led to Seafront’s stor?age sheds.

There were three of them in a row, each with its own red-?hand?ed stuffy-?guy sit?ting

in front. The guys ap?peared to be watch?ing Sheemie, and that gave him the

shiv?ers. Then he re?mem?bered his trip to crazy old bitch-?la?
dy Rhea's house. She

had been scary. These were just old duds stuffed full of straw.

"Su?san?" he called, low. "Are ye here?"

The door of the cen?ter shed was ajar. Now it trun?dled open a
lit?tle. "Come in!" she

called, al?so low. "Bring the mule! Hur?ry!"

He led Capi in?to a shed which smelled of straw and beans and
tack ... and

some?thing else. Some?thing sharp?er. Fire?works, he thought.
Shoot?ing-?pow?der, too.

Su?san, who had spent the morn?ing en?dur?ing fi?nal fit?tings,
was dressed in a thin

silk wrap?per and large leather boots. Her hair was done up in
curl?ing pa?pers of

bright blue and red.

Sheemie tit?tered. "You look quite amus?ing, Su?san, daugh?ter
of Pat. Quite a

chuck?le for me, I think."

"Yes, I'm a pic?ture for an artist to paint, all right," Su?san said,
look ing dis?tract?ed.

"We have to hur?ry. I have twen?ty min?utes be?fore I'm
missed. I'll be missed be?fore,

if that randy old goat is look?ing for me ...let's be quick!"

They lift?ed the bar?rels from Capi's back. Su?san took a bro?
ken horse-?bit from the

pock?et of her wrap?per and used the sharp end to pry off one
of the tops. She tossed

the bit to Sheemie, who pried off the oth?er. The ap?ple-?tart
smell of graf filled the
shed.

"Here!" She tossed Sheemie a soft cloth. "Dry it out as well as
you can. Doesn't

have to be per?fect, they're wrapped, but it's best to be safe."

They wiped the in?sides of the bar?rels, Su?san steal?ing ner?
vous glances at the door

ev?ery few sec?onds. "All right," she said. "Good. Now ... there's
two kinds. I'm sure

they won't be missed; there's enough stuff back there to blow up
half the world."

She hur?ried back in?to the dim?ness of the shed, hold?ing the
hem of her wrap?per up

with one hand, her boots clomp?ing. When she came back, her
arms were full of

wrapped pack?ages.

"These are the big?ger ones," she said.

He stored them in one of the casks. There were a dozen pack?ages in all, and

Sheemie could feel round things in?side, each about the size of a child's fist. Big-

bangers. By the time he had fin?ished pack?ing and putting the top back on the

bar?rel, she had re?turned with an arm?load of small?er pack?ages. These he stored in

the oth?er bar?rel. They were the lit?tle 'uns, from the feel, the ones that not on?ly

banged but flashed col?ored fire.

She helped him resling the bar?rels on Capi's back, still shoot?ing those lit?tle glances

at the shed door. When the bar?rels were se?cured to Capri?choso's sides, Su?san

sighed with re?lief and brushed her sweaty fore?head with the backs of her hands.

"Thank the gods that part's over," she said. "Now ye know where ye're to take them?"

"Aye, Su?san daugh?ter of Pat. To the Bar K. My friend Arthur Heath will put em safe."

"And if any?one asks what ye're do?ing out that way?" "Tak?ing sweet graf to the In-

World boys, 'cause they've de?cid?ed not to come to town for the Fair . . . why won't

they, Su?san? Don't they like Fairs?"

"Ye'll know soon enough. Don't mind it now, Sheemie. Go on—best be on your way."

Yet he lin?gered.

"What?" she asked, try?ing not to be im?pa?tient. "Sheemie, what is it?"

"I'd like to take a fin de ano kiss from ye, so I would." Sheemie's face had gone an

alarm?ing shade of red.

Su?san laughed in spite of her?self, then stood on her toes and kissed the com?er of

his mouth. With that, Sheemie float?ed out to the Bar K with his load of fire.

Reynolds rode out to Cit?go the fol?low?ing day, gal?lop?ing with a scarf wrapped

around his face so on?ly his eyes peered out. He would be very glad to get out of

this damned place that couldn't de?cide if it was ranch-?land or sea?coast. The

tem?per?ature wasn't all that low, but af?ter com?ing in over the wa?ter, the wind cut

like a ra?zor. Nor was that all—there was a brood?ing qual?ity to Ham?bry and all of

Mejis as the days wound down to?ward the Reap; a haunt?ed feel?ing he didn't care

for a bit. Roy felt it, too. Reynolds could see it in his eyes.

No, he'd be glad to have those three ba?by knights so much ash in the wind and this

place just a mem?ory.

He dis?mount?ed in the crum?bling re?fin?ery park?ing lot, tied his horse to the bumper

of a rusty old hulk with the mys?tery-?word chevro?let bare?ly read?able on its

tail?board, then walked to?ward the oil?patch. The wind blew hard, chill?ing him even

through the ranch-?style sheep?skin coat he wore, and twice he had to yank his hat

down around his ears to keep it from blow?ing off. On the whole, he was glad he

couldn't see him?self; he pro?ba bly looked like a fuck?ing farmer.

The place seemed fine, though . . . which was to say, de?sert?ed. The wind made a

lone?ly sough?ing sound as it combed through the firs on ei ther side of the pipe.

You'd nev?er guess that there were a dozen pairs of eyes look?ing out at you as you

strolled.

"Hai!" he called. "Come on out here, pard, and let's have some palaver."

For a mo?ment there was no re?sponse; then Hi?ram Quint of the Pi?ano Ranch and

Barkie Calla?han of the Trav?ellers' Rest came duck?ing their way out through the

trees. Holy shit, Reynolds thought, some?where be tween awe and amuse?ment.

There ain't that much beef in a butch?er shop.

There was a wretched old mus?ke?toon stuck in?to the waist?band of Quint's pants;

Reynolds hadn't seen one in years. He thought that if Quint was

lucky, it would

only misfire when he pulled the trigger. If he was unlucky, it would blow up in

his face and blind him.

"All quiet?" he asked.

Quint replied in Mejis bible-babble. Barkie listened, then said: "All well, sai. He

say he and his men grow impatient." Smiling cheerfully, his face giving no

indication of what he was saying, Barkie added: "If brains was blackpowder, this

ijit couldn't blow his nose."

"But he's a trustworthy idiot?"

Barkie shrugged. It might have been assent.

They went through the trees. Where Roland and Susan had seen almost thirty

tankers, there were now only half a dozen, and of those six, only two actually had

oil in them. Men sat on the ground or snoozed with their sombreros over their

faces. Most had guns that looked about as trustworthy as the one in Quint's

waistband. A few of the poorer vaqs had bolos. On the whole, Reynolds guessed

they would be more effective.

"Tell Lord Perth here that if the boys come, it's got to be an ambush, and they'll

only have one chance to do the job right," Reynolds said to Barkie.

Barkie spoke to Quint. Quint's lips parted in a grin, revealing a scary picket

of black and yellow fangs. He spoke briefly, then put his hands out in front of

them and closed them into huge, scarred fists, one above the other, as if wringing

the neck of an invisible enemy. When Barkie began to translate, Clay Reynolds

waved it away. He had caught only one word, but it was enough: murder.

5

All that pre-Fair week, Rhea sat in front of the glass, peering into its depths. She

had taken time to sew Ermot's head back onto his body with clumsy stitches of

black thread, and she sat with the decaying snake around her

neck as she watched

and dreamed, not noticing the stench that began to arise from the reptile as time

passed. Twice Musty came nigh, mewling for food, and each time Rhea battered the

troublesome thing away without so much as a glance. She herself grew more and

more gaunt, her eyes now looking like the sockets of the skulls stored in the net by

the door to her bedroom. She dozed occasionally as she sat with the ball in her lap

and the stinking snake-skin looped about her throat, her head down, the sharp point

of her chin digging at her chest, runners of drool hanging from the loose puckers

of her lips, but she never really slept. There was too much to see, far too much to

see.

And it was hers for the seeing. These days she didn't even have to pass her hands

above the glass to open its pink mists. All the Barony's mean-ness, all its pettiness (and

not so pettiness) cruelties, all its cozying and lying lay before her. Most of what she

saw was small and demeaning stuff—masculinizing boys peeking through

knot-holes at their undressed sisters, wives going through husbands' pockets,

looking for extra money or tobacco, Sheb the piano-player licking the seat of the

chair where his favorite whore had sat for awhile, a maid at Seafront spitting in to

Kimba Rimer's pillowcase after the Chancellor had kicked her for being slow in

getting out of his way.

These were all things which confirmed her opinion of the society she had left

behind. Sometimes she laughed wildly; sometimes she spoke to the people she

saw in the glass ball, as if they could hear her. By the third day of the week before

Reaping, she had ceased her trips to the privy, even though she could carry the ball

with her when she went, and the sour stench of urine began to rise from her.

By the fourth day, Musty had ceased com?ing near her. Rhea dreamed in the ball

and lost her?self in her dreams, as oth?ers had done be?fore her; deep in the pet?ty

plea?ures of far see?ing, she was un aware that the pink ball was steal?ing the

wrin?kled re?mains of her an?ima. She like?ly would have con?sidered it a fair trade if

she had known. She saw all the things peo?ple did in the shad?ows, and they were

the on?ly things she cared for, and for them she al?most cer?tain?ly would have

con?sidered her life's force a fair trade.

6

"Here," the boy said, "let me light it, gods damn you." Jonas would have

rec?og?nized the speak?er; he was the lad who had waved a sev?ered dog's tail across

the street at Jonas and called, We're Big Cof?fin Hunters just like you!

The boy to whom this charm?ing child had spo?ken tried to hold on?to the piece of

liv?er they had copped from the knock?er's be?hind the Low Mar?ket. The first boy

seized his ear and twist?ed. The sec?ond boy howled and held the chunk of liv?er out,

dark blood run?ning down his grimy knuck?les as he did.

"That's bet?ter," the first boy said, tak?ing it. "You want to re?member who the

ca?pataz is, round here."

They were be?hind a bak?ery stall in the Low Mar?ket. Near?by, drawn by the smell of

hot fresh bread, was a mangy mutt with one blind eye. He stared at them with

hun?gry hope.

There was a slit in the chunk of raw meat. Pok?ing out of it was a green big-?bang

fuse. Be?low the fuse, the liv?er bulged like the stom?ach of a preg?nant wom?an. The

first boy took a sul?fur match, stuck it be?tween his pro?trud?ing front teeth, and lit it.

"He won't nev?er!" said a third boy, in an agony of hope and an?tic?ipa?tion.

"Thin as he is?" the first boy said. "Oh yes he will. Bet ye my deck of cards

against yer hosstail."

The third boy thought it over and shook his head.

The first boy grinned. "It's a wise child ye are," he said, and lit the big-bang's fuse.

"Hey, cul'ly!" he called to the dog. "Want a bite o' sumpin good? Here ye go!"

He threw the chunk of raw liv'er. The scrawny dog nev'er hesitated at the hissing

fuse, but lunged forward with its one good eye fixed on the first decent food it had

seen in days. As it snatched the liv'er out of the air, the big-bang the boys had

slipped in?to it went off. There was a roar and a flash. The dog's head disappeared

from the jaws down. For a moment it continued to stand there, dripping, staring at

them with its one good eye, and then it collapsed.

"Toad?jer!" the first boy jeered. "Toad?jer he'd take it! Hap?py Reap to us, eh?"

"What are you boys do?ing?" a woman's voice called sharply. "Get out of there, ye

ravens!"

The boys fled, cackling, into the bright afternoon. They did sound like ravens.

7

Cuthbert and Alain sat their horses at the mouth of Eyebolt. Even with the wind

blowing the sound of the thinny away from them, it got inside your head and

buzzed there, rattling your teeth.

"I hate it," Cuthbert said through clenched teeth. "Gods, let's be quick."

"Aye," Alain said. They dismounted, bulky in their ranch-coats, and tied their

horses to the brush which lay across the front of the canyon. Or didn't, they thought

wouldn't have been necessary, but both boys could see the horses hated the

whining, grinding sound as much as they did. Cuthbert seemed to hear the thinny

in his mind, speaking words of invitation in a groaning, horribly persuasive voice.

Come on, Bert. Leave all this foolishness behind: the drums, the pride, the fear of

death, the loneliness you laugh at because laughing's all you

can think to do. And

the girl, leave her, too. You love her, don't you? And even if you don't, you want

her. It's sad that she loves your friend in stead of you, but if you come to me, all

that will stop both?er?ing you very soon. So come on. What are you wait?ing for?

"What am I wait?ing for?" he mut?tered.

"Huh?"

"I said, what are we wait?ing for? Let's get this done and get the holy hell out of

here."

From their sad?dle?bags they each took a small cot?ton bag. These con tained

gun?pow?der ex?tract?ed from the small?er fire?crack?ers Sheemie had brought them two

days be?fore. Alain dropped to his knees, pulled his knife, and be?gan to crawl

back?ward, dig?ging a trench as far un?der the roll of brush as he could.

"Dig it deep," Cuth?bert said. "We don't want the wind to blow it away."

Alain gave him a look which was re?mark?ably hot. "Do you want to do it? Just so

you can make sure it's done right?"

It's the thin?ny, Cuth?bert thought. It's work?ing on him, too.

"No, Al," he said humbly. "You're do?ing fine for some?one who's both blind and

soft in the head. Go on."

Alain looked at him fierce?ly a mo?ment longer, then grinned and re sumed the

trench un?der the brush. "You'll die young, Bert."

"Aye, like?ly." Cuth?bert dropped to his own knees and be?gan to crawl af?ter Alain,

sprin?kling gun?pow?der in?to the trench and try?ing to ig?nore the buzzy, ca?jol?ing

voice of the thin?ny. No, the gun?pow?der prob?ably wouldn't blow away, not un?less

there was a full gale. But if it rained, even the rolls of brush wouldn't be much

pro?tec?tion. If it rained—

Don't think of that, he told him?self. That's ka.

They fin?ished load?ing gun?pow?der trench?es un?der both sides of the brush bar?ri?er in

on?ly ten min?utes, but it felt longer. To the hors?es as well, it

seemed; they were

stamp?ing im?pa?tient?ly at the far end of their teth?ers, their ears laid back and their

eyes rolling. Cuth?bert and Alain un?tied them and mount?ed up. Cuth?bert's horse

ac?tu?al?ly bucked twice . . . ex?cept it felt more to Cuth?bert as if the poor old thing

were shud?der?ing.

In the mid?dle dis?tance, bright sun?shine twanged of bright steel. The tankers at

Hang?ing Rock. They had been pulled in as light to the sand?stone out?crop as

pos?si?ble, but when the sun was high, most of the shad?ow dis?appeared, and

con?ceal?ment dis?ap?peared with it.

"I re?al?ly can't be?lieve it," Alain said as they start?ed back. It would be a long ride,

in?clud?ing a wide swing around Hang?ing Rock to make sure they weren't seen.

"They must think we're blind."

"It's stupid they think we are," Cuth?bert said, "but I sup?pose it comes to the same."

Now that Eye?bolt Canyon was falling be?hind them, he felt al?most gid?dy with

re?lief. Were they go?ing in there a few days from now? Ac?tu?al?ly go?ing in, rid?ing to

with?in mere yards of where that cursed pud?dle start?ed? He couldn't be?lieve it ...

and he made him?self stop think?ing about it be?fore he could start be?liev?ing it.

"More rid?ers head?ing out to Hang?ing Rock," Alain said, point?ing back to?ward the

woods be?yond the canyon. "Do you see them?"

They were small as ants from this dis?tance, but Bert saw them very well.

"Chang?ing the guard. The im?por?tant thing is that they don't see us— you don't

think they can, do you?"

"Over here? Not like?ly."

Cuth?bert didn't think so, ei?ther.

"They'll all be down come Reap, won't they?" Alain asked. "It won't do us much

good to on?ly catch a few."

"Yes—I'm pret?ty sure they all will."

"Jonas and his pals?"

“Them, too.”

Ahead of them, the Bad Grass grew closer. The wind blew hard in their faces,

making their eyes water, but Cuthbert didn't mind. The sound of the thinny was

down to a faint drone behind him, and would soon be gone completely. Right now

that was all he needed to make him happy.

“Do you think we'll get away with it, Bert?”

“Dunno,” Cuthbert said. Then he thought of the gunshotter trenchless lying beneath

the dry rolls of brush, and grinned. “But I'll tell you one thing, Al: they'll know we

were here.”

8

In Mejis, as in every other Barony of Mid-World, the week before a Fair-day was

a political week. Important people came in from the farther corners of the Barony,

and there were a good many Conventions leading up to the main

Convention on Reaping Day. Susan was expected to be present at

these—mostly as a decorative testimony to the Mayor's continuing piety.

Olive was also present, and, in a cruelly comic dumb-show that only the women

truly appreciated, they sat on either side of the aging cockatoo, Susan pouring the

coffee, Olive passing the cake, both of them gracefully accepting compliments on

food and drink they'd had no hand in preparing.

Susan found it almost impossible to look at Olive's smiling, unhappy face. Her

husband would never lie with Pat Delgado's daughter . . . but said Thorin didn't

know that, and Susan couldn't tell her. She had only to glimpse the Mayor's wife

from the corner of her eye to remember what Roland had said that day on the Drop:

For a moment I thought she was my mother. But that was the problem, wasn't it?

Olive Thorin was nobody's mother. That was what had opened the door to this

horrible situation in the first place.

There had been some?thing much on Su?san's mind to do, but with the round of

ac?tiv?ities at May?or's House, it was but three days to Reap?ing before she got the

chance. Fi?nal?ly, fol?low?ing this lat?est Con?ver?sa?tion?al, she was able to slip out of

Pink Dress with Ap?plique (how she hat?ed it! how she hat?ed them all!) and jump

back in?to jeans, a plain rid?ing shirt, and a ranch-?coat. There was no time to braid

her hair, as she was ex?pect?ed back for May?or's Tea, but Maria tied it back for her

and off she had gone to the house she would short?ly be leav?ing for?ev?er.

Her busi?ness was in the back room of the sta?ble—the room her fa?ther had used as

an of?fice—but she went in?to the house first and heard what she'd hoped to hear:

her aunt's la?dy?like, whistling snores. Love?ly.

Su?san got a slice of bread and hon?ey and took it out to the barn-?sta?ble, pro?tect?ing

it as best she could from the clouds of dust that blew across the yard in the wind.

Her aunt's stuffy-?guy rat?tled on his post in the gar?den.

She ducked in?to the sweet-?smelling shad?ows of the barn. Py?lon and Fe?li?cia

nick?ered hel?lo, and she di?vid?ed what she hadn't eat?en be?tween them. They seemed

pleased enough to get it. She made es?pe?cial?ly of Fe?li?cia, whom she would soon

be leav?ing be?hind.

She had avoid?ed the lit?tle of?fice since her fa?ther died, afraid of ex?act?ly the sort of

pang that struck her when she lift?ed the latch and went in. The nar?row win?dows

were now cov?ered with cob?webs, but they still let in au?tumn's bright light, more

than enough for her to be able to see the pipe in the ash?tray—the red one, his

fa?vorite, the one he called his think?ing-?pipe— and a bit of tack laid over the back

of his desk chair. He had prob?ably been mend?ing it by gaslight, had put it by

think?ing to fin?ish the next day ... then the snake had done its dance un?der Foam's

hoofs and there had nev?er been a next day. Not for Pat Del?ga? do.

“Oh, Da,” she said in a small and bro?ken voice. “How I do miss thee.”

She crossed to the desk and ran her fin?gers along its sur?face, leav?ing trails of dust.

She sat down in his chair, lis?tened to it creak un?der her as it had al?ways creaked

un?der him, and that pushed her over the edge. For the next five min?utes she sat

there and wept, screw?ing her fists in?to her eyes as she had as a wee shim. On?ly

now, of course, there was no Big Pat to come up?on her and jol?ly her out of it,

tak?ing her on his lap and kiss?ing her in that sen?si?tive place un?der her chin

(es?pe?cial?ly sen?si?tive to the bris?tles on his up?per lip, it had been) un?til her tears

turned to gig?gles. Time was a face on the wa?ter, and this time it was the face of her

fa?ther.

At last her tears ta?pered to snif?fles. She opened the desk draw?ers, one af?ter

an?oth?er, find?ing more pipes (many ren?dered use?less by his con?stant stem-

chew?ing), a hat, one of her own dolls (it had a bro?ken arm Pat had ap?par?ent?ly

nev?er got?ten around to putting right), quill?-pens, a lit?tle flask— emp?ty but with a

faint smell of whiskey still present around its neck. The on?ly item of in?ter?est was

in the bot?tom draw?er: a pair of spurs. One still had its star row?el, but the oth?er had

been bro?ken off. These were, she was al?most pos?itive, the spurs he had been

wear?ing on the day he died.

If my da was here, she had be?gun that day on the Drop. But he’s not, Roland had

said. He’s dead.

A pair of spurs, a bro?ken-?off row?el.

She bounced them in her hand, in her mind’s eye see?ing Ocean Foam rear, spilling

her fa?ther (one spur catch?es in a stir?rup; the row?el breaks free), then stum?bling

side?ways and falling atop him. She saw this clear?ly, but she

didn't see the snake

Fran Lengyll had told them about. That she didn't see at all.

She put the spurs back where she had found them, got up, and looked at the shelf

to the right of the desk, handy to Pat Del?ga?do's smart hand. Here was a line of

leather-bound ledgers, a price-less trove of books in a so-ciety that had for-got-ten

how to make pa-per. Her fa-ther had been the man in charge of the Barony's horse

for al-most thir-ty years, and here were his stock-line books to prove it.

Su-san took down the last one and be-gan to page through it. This time she al-most

wel-come the pang that struck her as she saw her fa-ther's fa-mil-iar hand—the

la-bored script, the steep and some-how more con-fi-dent num-bers.

Born of HEN?RI?ET?TA, (2) foals both well

Still-born of DELIA, a roan (MU?TANT)

Born of YOLAN?DA, a THOR?OUGH?BRED, a GOOD MALE COLT

And, fol-low-ing each, the date. So neat, he had been. So thor-ough. So ...

She stopped sud-den-ly, aware that she had found what she was look ing for even

with-out any clear knowl-edge of what she was do-ing in here. I he last dozen pages

of her da's fi-nal stock-line book had been torn out.

Who had done it? Not her fa-ther; a large-ly self-taught man, he revered pa-per the

way some peo-ple revered gods or gold.

And why had it been done?

That she thought she knew: hors-es, of cours-es. There were too many on the Drop.

And the ranch-ers—Lengyll, Croy-don, Ren-frew—were ly-ing about the thread-ed

qual-ity of the stock-line. So was Hen-ry Wert-ner, the man who had suc-ceed-ed to her

fa-ther's job.

If my da was here—

But he's not. He's dead.

She had told Roland she couldn't be-lieve Fran Lengyll would lie about her fa-ther's

death . . . but she could be-lieve it now.

Gods help her, she could be?lieve it now.

“What are ye do?ing in here?”

She gave a lit?tle scream, dropped the book, and whirled around. Cordelia stood

there in one of her rusty black dress?es. The top three but tons were un?done, and

Su?san could see her aunt’s col?lar?bones stick?ing out above the plain white cot?ton of

her shift. It was on?ly on see?ing those pro trud?ing bones that Su?san re?al?ized how

much weight Aunt Cord had lost over the last three months or so. She could see

the red im?print of the pil low on her aunt’s left cheek, like the mark of a slap. Her

eyes glit?tered from dark, bruised-?look?ing hol?lows of flesh.

“Aunt Cord! You star?tled me! You—”

“What are ye do?ing in here?” Aunt Cord re?peat?ed.

Su?san bent and picked up the book. “I came to re?mem?ber my fa?ther,” she said, and

put the book back on the shelf. Who had torn those pages out? Lengyll? Rimer?

She doubt?ed it. She thought it more like?ly that the wom?an stand?ing be?fore her

right now had done it. Per?haps for as lit?tle as a sin?gle piece of red gold. Noth?ing

asked, noth?ing told, so all is well, she would have thought, pop?ping the coin in?to

her mon?ey-?box, af?ter first bit ing its edge to make sure it was true.

“Re?mem?ber him? It’s ask his for?give?ness, ye should do. For ye’ve for?got?ten his

face, so ye have. Most grievous have ye for?got?ten it, Sue.”

Su?san on?ly looked at her.

“Have ye been with him to?day?” Cordelia asked in a brit?tle, laugh?ing voice. Her

hand went to the red pil?low-?mark on her cheek and be?gan rub bing it. She had

been get?ting bad by de?grees, Su?san re?al?ized, but had be come ev?er so much worse

since the gos?sip about Jonas and Coral Thorin had start?ed. “Have ye been with sai

Dear?born? Is yer crack still dewy from his spend? Here, let me see for my?self!”

Her aunt glid?ed for?ward—spec?tral in her black dress, her bodice open, her

slip?pered feet peep?ing—and Su?san pushed her back. In her fright and dis?gust, she pushed hard. Cordelia struck the wall be?side the cob?webbed win?dow.

“Ye should ask for?give?ness yer?self,” Su?san said. “To speak to his daugh?ter so in

this place. In this place.” She let her eyes turn to the shelf of ledgers, then re?turn to

her aunt. The look of fright?ened cal?cu?la?tion she saw on Cordelia Del?ga?do’s face

told her all she want?ed or need?ed to know. She hadn’t been a par?ty to her broth?er’s

mur?der, that Su?san could not be?lieve, but she had known some?thing of it. Yes,

some?thing.

”Ye faith?less bitch,” Cordelia whis?pered.

”No,” Su?san said, ”I have been true.”

And so, she re?al?ized, she had been. A great weight seemed to slip off her shoul?ders

at the thought. She walked to the door of the of?fice and turned back to her aunt.

”I’ve slept my last night here,” she said. ”I’ll not lis?ten to more such as this. Nor

look at ye as ye are now. It hurts my heart and steals the love I’ve kept for ye since

I was lit?tle, when ye did the best ye could to be my ma.”

Cordelia clapped her hands over her face, as if look?ing at Su?san hurt her.

”Get out, then!” she screamed. ”Go back to Seafront or wher?ev?er it is thee rolls

with that boy! If I nev?er see thy trol?lop’s face again, I’ll count my life good!”

Su?san led Py?lon from the sta?ble. When she got him in?to the yard, she was sob?bing

al?most too hard to mount up. Yet mount she did, and she couldn’t de?ny that there

was re?lief in her heart as well as sor?row. When she turned on?to the High Street and

boot?ed Py?lon in?to a gal?lop, she didn’t look back.

9

In a dark hour of the fol?low?ing morn?ing, Olive Thorin crept from the room where

she now slept to the one she had shared for al?most forty years with her hus?band.

The floor was cold un?der her bare feet and she was shiv?er?ing

by the time she

reached the bed ... but the chilly floor wasn't the only reason she was shivering.

She slid in beside the gaunt, snoring man in the nightcap, and when he turned

away from her (his knees and back crackling loudly as he did), she pressed against

him and hugged him tightly. There was no passion in this, but only a need to share

a bit of his warmth. His chest—narrow but almost as well-known to her as her

own plump one—rose and fell under her hands, and she began to quiet a little. He

stirred, and she thought for a moment he would wake and find her sharing his bed

for the first time in gods knew how long.

Yes, wake, she thought, do. She didn't dare wake him of her own—all her courage

had been exhausted just getting here, creeping through the dark following one of

the worst dreams she had ever had in her life—but if he woke, she would take it as

a sign and tell him she had dreamed of a vast bird, a cruel golden-eyed roc that

flew above the Barony on wings that dripped blood.

Wherever its shadow fell, there was blood, she would tell him, and its shadow fell

everywhere. The Barony ran with it, from Hamby all the way out to Eyebolt. And

I swelled big fire in the wind. I ran to tell you and you were dead in your study,

sitting by the hearth with your eyes gouged out and a skull in your lap.

But instead of waking, in his sleep he took her hand, as he had used to, do before

he had begun to look at the young girls—even the serving-wench—when they

passed, and Olive decided she would only lie here, and be still and let him hold

her hand. Let it be like the old days for a bit, when everything had been right

between them.

She slept a little herself. When she woke, dawn's first gray light was creeping in

through the windows. He had dropped her hand—had, in fact,

scooted away from

her en?tire?ly, to his edge of the bed. It wouldn't do for him to wake and find her

here, she de?cid?ed, and the ur?gen?cy of her night mare was gone. She turned back

the cov?ers, swung her feet out, then looked at him once more. His night?cap had

come askew. She put it right, her hands smooth?ing the cloth and the bony brow

be?neath. He stirred again. Olive wait?ed un?til he had qui?et?ed, then got up. She

slipped back to her own room like a phan?tom.

10

The mid?way booths opened in Green Heart two days be?fore Reap?ing-?Fair, and the

first folks came to try their luck at the spin?ning wheel and the bot?tle-?toss and the

bas?ket-?ring. There was al?so a pony-?train—a cart filled with laugh?ing chil?dren,

pulled along a fig?ure eight of nar?row-?gauge rails.

“Was the pony named Char?lie?” Ed?die Dean asked Roland.

“I think not,” Roland said. “We have a rather un?pleas?ant word that sounds like

that in the High Speech.”

“What word?” Jake asked.

“The one,” said the gun?slinger, “that means death.”

Roy De?pape stood watch?ing the pony plod its ap?point?ed rounds for a cou?ple of

turns, re?mem?ber?ing with some nos?tal?gia his own rides in such a cart as a child. Of

course, most of his had been stolen.

When he had looked his fill, De?pape saun?tered on down to the Sher iff's of?fice and

went in. Herk Av?ery, Dave, and Frank Clay?pool were clean?ing an odd and

fan?tas?ti?cal as?sort?ment of guns. Av?ery nod?ded at De pape and went back to what he

was do?ing. There was some?thing strange about the man, and af?ter a mo?ment or

two De?pape re?al?ized what it was: the Sher?iff wasn't eat?ing. It was the first time

he'd ev?er come in here that the Sher?iff didn't have a plate of grub close at hand.

“All ready for to?mor?row?” De?pape asked.

Av?ery gave him a half-?ir?ri?tat?ed, half-?smil?ing look. “What

the hell kind of ques?tion
is that?”

“One that Jonas sent me to ask,” De?pape said, and at that Av?ery’s queer, nervy
smile fal?tered a lit?tle.

“Aye, we’re ready.” Av?ery swept a meaty arm over the guns.
“Don’t ye see we
are?”

De?pape could have quot?ed the old say?ing about how the
proof of the pud?ding was
in the eat?ing, but what was the point? Things would work out
if the three boys

were as fooled as Jonas thought they were; if they weren’t
fooled, they would

like?ly carve Herk Av?ery’s fat butt off the top of his legs and
feed it to the hand?iest

pack of wolver?ines. It didn’t make much nev?er mind to Roy
De?pape one way or
the oth?er.

“Jonas al?so ast me to re?mind you it’s ear?ly.”

“Aye, aye, we’ll be there ear?ly,” Av?ery agreed. “These two and
six more good

men. Fran Lengyll’s asked to go along, and he’s got a ma?chine-?
gun.” Av?ery spoke

this last with ring?ing pride, as if he him?self had in vent?ed the
ma?chine-?gun. Then

he looked at De?pape sly?ly. “What about you, cof?fin-?hand?
Want to go along?

Won’t take me more’n an eye?blink to dep?utize ye.”

“I have an?oth?er chore. Reynolds, too.” De?pape smiled.
“There’s plen?ty of work for

all of us. Sher?iff—af?ter all, it’s Reap?ing.”

11

That af?ter?noon, Su?san and Roland met at the hut in the Bad
Grass. She told him

about the book with the torn-?out pages, and Roland showed
her what he’d left in

the hut’s north cor?ner, se?cret?ed be?neath a moul?der?ing pile
of skins.

She looked first at this, then at him with wide and fright?ened
eyes. “What’s wrong?

What does thee sus?pect is wrong?”

He shook his head. Noth?ing was wrong ... not that he could
tell, any way. And yet

he had felt a strong need to do what he’d done, to leave what

he'd left. It wasn't the

touch, noth?ing like it, but on?ly in?tu?ition.

"I think ev?ery?thing is all right ... or as right as things can be when the odds may

turn out fifty of them for each of us. Su?san, our on?ly chance is to take them by

sur?prise. You're not go?ing to risk that, are you? Not plan?ning to go to Lengyll,

wav?ing your fa?ther's stock?line book around?"

She shook her head. If Lengyll had done what she now sus?pect?ed, he'd get his

pay?back two days from now. There would be reap?ing, all right. Reap?ing aplen?ty.

But this ... this fright?ened her, and she said so.

"Lis?ten." Roland took her face in his hands and looked in?to her eyes. "I'm on?ly

try?ing to be care?ful. If things go bad?ly—and they could—you're the one most

like?ly to get away clean. You and Sheemie. If that hap?pens, Su?san,

you—thee—must come here and take my guns. Take them west to Gilead. Find

my fa?ther. He'll know thee are who thee says by what thee shows. Tell him what

hap?pened here. That's all."

"If any?thing hap?pens to thee, Roland, I won't be able to do any?thing. Ex?cept die."

His hands were still on her face. Now he used them to make her head shake

slow?ly, from side to side. "You won't die," he said. There was a cold?ness in his

voice and eyes that struck her not with fear but awe. She thought of his blood—of

how old it must be, and how cold it must some times flow. "Not with this job

un?done. Promise me."

"I... I promise, Roland. I do."

"Tell me aloud what you promise."

"I'll come here. Get yer guns. Take them to yer da. Tell him what hap?pened."

He nod?ded and let go of her face. The shapes of his hands were print?ed faint?ly on

her cheeks.

"Ye fright?ened me," Su?san said, and then shook her head. That wasn't right. "Ye

do fright?en me."

"I can't help what I am."

"And I wouldn't change it." She kissed his left cheek, his right cheek, his mouth.

She put her hand in?side his shirt and ca?ressed his nip?ple. It grew in?stant?ly hard

be?neath the tip of her fin?ger. "Bird and bear and hare and fish," she said, now

mak?ing soft but?ter?fly kiss?es all over his face. "Give your love her fond?est wish."

Af?ter, they lay be?neath a bearskin Roland had brought along and lis tened to the

wind sough through the grass.

"I love that sound," she said. "It al?ways makes me wish I could be part of the wind

... go where it goes, see what it sees."

"This year, if ka al?lows, you will."

"Aye. And with thee." She turned to him, up on one el?bow. Light fell through the

ru?ined roof and dap?pled her face. "Roland, I love thee." She kissed him . . . and

then be?gan to cry.

He held her, con?cerned. "What is it? Sue, what trou?bles thee?"

"I don't know," she said, cry?ing hard?er. "All I know is that there's a shad?ow on my

heart." She looked at him with tears still flow?ing from her eyes. "Thee'd not leave

me, would ye, dear? Thee'd not go with?out Sue, would ye?"

"No."

"For I've giv?en all I have to ye, so I have. And my vir?gin?ity's the very least of it,

thee knows."

"I'd nev?er leave you." But he felt cold in spite of the bearskin, and the wind

out?side—so com?fort?ing a mo?ment ago—sound?ed like beast's breath. "Nev?er, I

swear."

"I'm fright?ened, though. In?deed I am."

"You needn't be," he said, speak?ing slow?ly and care?ful?ly ... for sud den?ly all the

wrong words want?ed to come tum?bling out of his mouth. We 'II leave this,

Su?san—not day af?ter to?mor?row, on Reap?ing, but now, this minute. Dress and we'll

go cross?wise to the wind; it's south we'll ride and nev?er look

back. We'll be—

—haunt?ed.

That's what they would be. Haunt?ed by the faces of Alain and Cuth?bert; haunt?ed

by the faces of all the men who might die in the Shaved Moun?tains, mas?sa?cred by

weapons torn from the ar?mory-?crypts where they should have been left. Haunt?ed

most of all by the faces of their fa?thers, for all the rest of their lives. Not even the

South Pole would be far enough to es?cape those faces.

"All you need do day af?ter to?mor?row is claim in?dis?po?si?tion at lunch." They had

gone over all this be?fore, but now, in his sud?den, point?less fright, it was all he

could think of to say. "Go to your room, then leave as you did on the night we met

in the grave?yard. Hide up a lit?tle. Then, when it's three o' the clock, ride here, and

look un?der the skins in yon com?er. If my guns are gone—and they will be, I swear

they will—then ev?ery?thing's all right. You'll ride to meet us. Come to the place

above the canyon, the one we told you of. We'll—"

"Aye, I know all that, but some?thing's wrong." She looked at him, touched the side

of his face. "I fear for thee and me, Roland, and know not why."

"All will work out," he said. "Ka—"

"Speak not to me of ka!" she cried. "Oh please don't! Ka like a wind, my fa?ther

said, it takes what it will and minds the plea of no man or wom?an. Greedy old ka,

how I hate it!"

"Su?san—"

"No, say no more." She lay back and pushed the bearskin down to her knees,

ex?pos?ing a body that far greater men than Hart Thorin might have giv?en away

king?doms for. Beads of sun?light ran over her bare skin like rain. She held her arms

out to him. Nev?er had she looked more beau?ti?ful to Roland than she did then, with

her hair spread about her and that haunt?ed look on her face. He would think lat?er:

She knew. Some part of her knew.

"No more talk?ing," she said. "Talk?ing's done. If you love me, then love me."

And for the last time, Roland did. They rocked to?geth?er, skin to skin and breath to

breath, and out?side the wind roared in?to the west like a tidal wave.

12

That evening, as the grin?ning De?mon rose in the sky, Cordelia left her house and

walked slow?ly across the lawn to her gar?den, de?tour?ing around the pile of leaves

she had raked that af?ter?noon. In her arms was a bun?dle of clothes. She dropped

them in front of the pole to which her stuffy-?guy was bound, then looked rapt?ly up

at the ris?ing moon: the know?ing wink of the eye, the ghoul's grin; sil?ver as bone

was that moon, a white but?ton against vi?olet silk.

It grinned at Cordelia; Cordelia grinned back. Fi?nal?ly, with the air of a wom?an

awak?en?ing from a trance, she stepped for?ward and pulled the stuffy-?guy off its

pole. His head lolled limply against her shoul?der, like the head of a man who has

found him?self too drunk to dance. His red hands dan?gled.

She stripped off the guy's clothes, un?cov?er?ing a bulging, vague?ly hu?manoid shape

in a pair of her dead broth?er's long?han?dles. She took one of the things she had

brought from the house and held it up to the moon?light. A red silk rid?ing shirt, one

of May?or Thorin's presents to Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty. One of those she

wouldn't wear. Whore's clothes, she had called them. And what did that make

Cordelia Del?ga?do, who had tak?en care of her even af?ter her bull?head?ed da had

de?cid?ed he must stand against the likes of Fran Lengyll and John Croy?don? It

made her a whore house madam, she sup?posed.

This thought led to an im?age of El?dred Jonas and Coral Thorin, naked and striv?ing

while a honky-?tonk pi?ano planked out "Red Dirt Boo?gie" be low them, and

Cordelia moaned like a dog.

She yanked the silk shirt over the stuffy's head. Next came one of Su'san's split

rid'ing skirts. Af'ter the skirt, a pair of her slip'pers. And last, re'plac'ing the

som'brero, one of Su'san's spring bon'nets.

Presto! The stuffy-'guy was now a stuffy-'gal.

"And caught red-'hand'ed ye are," she whis'pered. "I know. Oh yes, I know. I wasn't

born yes'ter'day."

She car'ried the stuffy from the gar'den to the pile of leaves on the lawn. She laid it

close by the leaves, then scooped some up and pushed them in? to the bodice of the

rid'ing shirt, mak'ing rudi'men'ta'ry breasts. That done, she took a match from her

pock'et and struck it alight.

The wind, as if ea'ger to co'op'er'ate, dropped. Cordelia touched the match to the dry

leaves. Soon the whole pile was blaz'ing. She picked the stuffy-'gal up in her arms

and stood with it in front of the fire. She didn't hear the rat'tling fire'crack'ers from

town, or the wheeze of the steam-'or'gan in Green Heart, or the mari'achi band

play'ing in the Low Mar'ket; when a burn'ing leaf rose and swirled past her hair,

threat'en'ing to set it alight, she didn't seem to no'tice. Her eyes were wide and

blank.

When the fire was at its height, she stepped to its edge and threw the stuffy on.

Flame whumped up around it in bright or'ange gusts; sparks and burn'ing leaves

swirled sky'ward in a fun'nel.

"So let it be done!" Cordelia cried. The fire'light on her face turned her tears to

blood. "Chary'ou tree! Aye, just so!"

The thing in the rid'ing clothes caught fire, its face char'ring, its red hands blaz'ing,

its white-'cross eyes turn'ing black. Its bon'net flared; the face be'gan to bum.

Cordelia stood and watched, fists clench'ing and un'clench'ing, heed less of the

sparks that lit on her skin, heed'less of the blaz'ing leaves that swirled to'ward the

house. Had the house caught fire, she would like?ly have ignored that as well.

She watched until the stuffy dressed in her niece's clothes was nothing but ashes

lying atop more ashes. Then, as slowly as a robot with rust in its works, she

walked back to the house, lay down on the sofa, and slept like the dead.

13

It was three-thirty in the morning of the day before Reaping, and Stanley Ruiz

thought he was finally done for the night. The last music had quit twenty minutes

ago—Sheb had outlasted the mariachis by an hour or so, and now lay snoring with

his face in the sawdust. Sai Thorin was upstairs, and there had been no sign of the

Big Coffin Hunters; Stanley had an idea those were up to Seafront tonight. He also

had an idea there was black work on offer, although he didn't know that for sure.

He looked up at the glassy, two-headed gaze of The Romp. "Nor want to, old pal,"

he said. "All I want is about nine hours of sleep—tomorrow comes the real party,

and they won't leave till dawn. So—"

A shrill scream rose from somewhere behind the building. Stanley jerked

backward, thumping into the bar. Beside the piano, Sheb raised his head briefly,

muttered "Wuzzat?" and dropped it back with a thump.

Stanley had absolutely no urge to investigate the source of the scream, but he

supposed he would, just the same. It had sounded like that sad old bitch Pettie the

Trotter. "I'd like to trot your saggy old ass right out of town," he muttered, then

bent down to look under the bar. There were two stout ashwood clubs here, The

Calmer and The Killer. The Calmer was smooth buried wood, guaranteed to put

out the lights for two hours any time you tapped some boisterous cull's head in the

right place with it.

Stanley consulted his feelings and took the other club. It

was shorter than The

Calmer, wider at the top. And the business end of The Killer was studded with

nails.

Stanley went down to the end of the bar, through the door, and across a dim

supply-room stacked with barrels smelling of graf and whiskey. At the rear was a

door giving on the back yard. Stanley approached it, took a deep breath, and

unlocked it. He kept expecting Pettie to voice an other head-bursting scream, but

none came. There was only the sound of the wind.

Maybe you got lucky and she's kilt, Stanley thought. He opened the door, stepping

back and raising the nail-studded club at the same time.

Pettie wasn't kilt. Dressed in a stained shift (a Pettie-skirt, one might say), the

whore was standing on the path which led to the back privy, her hands clutched

together above the swell of her bosom and below the drooping turkey-wattles of

her neck. She was looking up at the sky.

"What is it?" Stanley asked, hurrying down to her. "Near scared ten years off my

life, ye did."

"The moon, Stanley!" she whispered. "Oh, look at the moon, would ye!"

He looked up, and what he saw set his heart thumping, but he tried to speak

reasonably and calmly. "Come now, Pettie, it's dust, that's all. Be reasonable, dear,

ye know how the wind's blown these last few days, and no rain to knock down

what it carries; it's dust, that's all."

Yet it didn't look like dust.

"I know what I see," whispered Pettie.

Above them, Demon Moon grinned and winked one eye through what appeared to

be a shifting scrim of blood.

CHAPTER VII

TAKING THE BALL

1

While a certain whore and certain bartender were still gapping up at the bloody

moon, Kim?ba Rimer awoke sneez?ing.

Damn, a cold for Reap?ing, he thought. As much as I have to be out over the next

two days, I'll be lucky if it doesn't turn in?to—

Some?thing fluffed the end of his nose, and he sneezed again. Com?ing out of his

nar?row chest and dry slot of a mouth, it sound?ed like a small-cal?iber pis?tol-shot in the black room.

“Who's there?” he cried.

No an?swer. Rimer sud?den?ly imag?ined a bird, some?thing nasty and bad-?tem?pered,

that had got?ten in here in day?light and was now fly?ing around in the dark,

flut?ter?ing against his face as he slept. His skin crawled—birds, bugs, bats, he hat?ed

them all—and he fum?bled so en?er get?ical?ly for the gas-lamp on the ta?ble by his

bed that he al?most knocked it off on?to the floor.

As he drew it to?ward him, that flut?ter came again. This time puff?ing at his cheek.

Rimer screamed and re?coiled against the pil?lows, clutch?ing the lamp to his chest.

He turned the switch on the side, heard the hiss of gas, then pushed the spark. The

lamp lit, and in the thin cir?cle of its ra?di?ance, he saw not a flut?ter?ing bird but Clay

Reynolds sit?ting on the edge of the bed. In one hand Reynolds held the feath?er

with which he had been tick ling Mejia's Chan?cel?lor. His oth?er was hid?den in his

cloak, which lay in his lap.

Reynolds had dis?liked Rimer from their first meet?ing in the woods far west of

town—those same woods, be?yond Eye?bolt Canyon, where Far-?son's man Lati?go

now quar?tered the main con?tin?gent of his troops. It had been a windy night, and as

he and the oth?er Cof?fin Hunters en?tered the lit tle glade where Rimer,

ac?com?pa?nied by Lengyll and Croy?don, were sit ting by a small fire, Reynolds's

cloak swirled around him. “Sai Man?to,” Rimer had said, and the oth?er two had

laughed. It had been meant as a harm?less joke, but it hadn't

seemed harmless to

Reynolds. In many of the lands where he had travelled, man to meant not "cloak"

but "leaner" or "bender." It was, in fact, a slang term for homosexual. That Rimer

(a provincial man under his veneer of cynical sophistication) didn't know this

never crossed Reynolds's mind. He knew when people were making small of him,

and if he could make such a person pay, he did so.

For Kimba Rimer, payday had come.

"Reynolds? What are you doing? How did you get in h—"

"You got to be thinking of the wrong cowboy," the man sitting on the bed replied.

"No Reynolds here. Just Senor Man to." He took out the hand which had been

under his cloak. In it was a keenly honed cuchillo. Reynolds had purchased it in

Low Market with this chore in mind. He raised it now and drove the twelve-inch

blade into Rimer's chest. It went all the way through, pinning him like a bug. A

bedbug, Reynolds thought.

The lamp fell out of Rimer's hands and rolled off the bed. It landed on the foot-

runner, but did not break. On the far wall was Kimba Rimer's distorted, struggling

shadow. The shadow of the other man bent over it like a hungry vulture.

Reynolds lifted the hand which had held the knife. He turned it so the small blue

tattooed coffin between thumb and forefinger was in front of Rimer's eyes. He

wanted it to be the last thing Rimer saw on this side of the clearing.

"Let's hear you make fun of me now," Reynolds said. He smiled. "Come on. Let's

just hear you."

2

Shortly before five o'clock, Mayor Thorin woke from a terrible dream. In it, a bird

with pink eyes had been cruising slowly back and forth above the Barony.

Wherever its shadow fell, the grass turned yellow, the leaves fell shocked from the

trees, and the crops died. The shad?ow was turn?ing his green
and pleas?ant Barony

in?to a waste land. It may be my Barony, but it's my bird, too,
he thought just be?fore

awak?en?ing, hud?dled in?to a shud?dery ball on one side of his
bed. My bird, I brought

it here, I let it out of its cage. There would be

no more sleep for him this night, and Thorin knew it. He poured
him?self a glass of

wa?ter, drank it, then walked in?to his study, ab?sent?ly pick?
ing his night?gown from

the cleft of his bony old ass as he went. The puff on the end of
his night?cap

bobbed be?tween his shoul?der blades; his knees cracked at ev?
ery step.

As for the guilty feel?ings ex?pressed by the dream . . . well,
what was done was

done. Jonas and his friends would have what they'd come for
(and paid so

hand?some?ly for) in an?oth?er day; a day af?ter that, they'd be
gone. Fly away, bird

with the pink eyes and pesti?lent shad?ow; fly away to wher?ev?
er you came from and

take the Big Cof?fin Boys with you. He had an idea that by
Year's End he'd be too

busy dip?ping his wick to think much about such things. Or to
dream such dreams.

Be?sides, dreams with?out vis?ible sign were just dreams, not
omens.

The vis?ible sign might have been the boots be?neath the study
drapes— just the

scuffed tips of them show?ing—but Thorin nev?er looked in that
di?rec?tion. His eyes

were fixed on the bot?tle be?side his fa?vorite chair. Drink?ing
claret at five in the

morn?ing was no sort of habit to get in?to, but this once
wouldn't hurt. He'd had a

ter?ri?ble dream, for gods' sake, and af?ter all—

“To?mor?row's Reap?ing,” he said, sit?ting in the wing-?chair
on the edge of the hearth.

“I guess a man can jump a fence or two, come Reap.”

He poured him?self a drink, the last he'd ev?er take in this
world, and coughed as the

fire hit his bel?ly and then climbed back up his throat, warm?
ing it. Bet?ter, aye,

much. No gi?ant birds now, no plaguey shad?ows. He stretched out his arms, laced

his long and bony fin?gers to?geth?er, and cracked them viciously.

“I hate it when you do that, you scrawny git,” spoke a voice directly in?to Thorin’s left ear.

Thorin jumped. His heart took its own tremendous leap in his chest. The empty

glass flew from his hand, and there was no foot?runner to cushion its landing. It smashed on the hearth.

Before Thorin could scream, Roy De?pape brushed off the mayoral night?cap,

seized the gauzy remains of the mayoral mane, and yanked the mayoral head back.

The knife De?pape held in his other hand was much humbler than the one Reynolds

had used, but it cut the old man’s throat efficiently enough. Blood sprayed scarlet

in the dim room. De?pape let go of Thorin’s hair, went back to the drapes he had

been hiding behind, and picked something up off the floor. It was Cuthbert’s

lookout. De?pape brought it back to the chair and put it in the dying Mayor’s lap.

“Bird . . .” Thorin gargled through a mouthful of blood. “Bird!”

“Yar, old fellow, and trig o’ you to notice at a time like this, I will say.” De?pape

pulled Thorin’s head back again and took the old man’s eyes out with two quick

flips of his knife. One went into the dead fireplace; the other hit the wall and slid

down behind the fire?tools. Thorin’s right foot trembled briefly and was still.

One more job to do.

De?pape looked around, saw Thorin’s night?cap, and decided the ball on the end

would serve. He picked it up, dipped it in the puddle of blood in the Mayor’s lap,

and drew the Good Man’s sigil—
—on the wall.

“There,” he murmured, standing back. “If that don’t finish em, nothing on earth will.”

True enough. The on?ly ques?tion left unan?swered was whether or not Roland's katet could be tak?en alive.

3

Jonas had told Fran Lengyll ex?act?ly where to place his men, two in?side the sta?ble

and six more out, three of these lat?ter gents hid?den be?hind rusty old im?ple?ments,

two hid?den in the burnt-?out re?mains of the home place, one—Dave

Hol?lis—crouched on top of the sta?ble it?self, spy?ing over the roof?peak. Lengyll was

glad to see that the men in the posse took their job se?ri?ous?ly. They were on?ly boys,

it was true, but boys who had on one oc ca?sion come off ahead of the Big Cof?fin

Hunters.

Sher?iff Av?ery gave a fair im?pres?sion of be?ing in charge of things un?til they got

with?in a good shout of the Bar K. Then Lengyll, ma?chine-?gun slung over one

shoul?der (and as straight-?hacked in the sad?dle as he had been at twen?ty), took

com?mand. Av?ery, who looked ner?vous and sound?ed out of breath, seemed re?lieved

rather than of?fend?ed.

"I'll tell ye where to go as was (old to me, for it's a good plan, and I've no quar?rel

with it," Lengyll had told his posse. In the dark, their faces were lit?tle more than

dim blurs. "On?ly one thing I'll say to ye on my own hook. We don't need em alive,

but it's best we have em so—it's the Barony we want to put paid to em, the

com?mon folk, and so put paid to this whole busi?ness, as well. Shut the door on it,

if ye will. So I say this: if there's cause to shoot, shoot. But I'll flay the skin off the

face of any man who shoots with?out cause. Do ye un?der?stand?"

No re?sponse. It seemed they did.

"All right," Lengyll had said. His face was stony. "I'll give ye a minute to make

sure your gear's muf?fled, and then on we go. Not an?oth?er' word from here on out."

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out of the bunkhouse at quarter past six that

morning, and stood a-row on the porch. Alain was finishing his coffee. Cuthbert

was yawning and stretching. Roland was buttoning his shirt and looking

southwest, toward the Bad Grass. He was thinking not of ambushes but of Susan.

Her tears. Greedy old ka, how I hate it, she had said.

His instincts did not awake; Alain's touch, which had sensed Jonas on the day

Jonas had killed the pigeons, did not so much as quiver. As for Cuthbert—

"One more day of quiet!" that worthy exclaimed to the dawnning sky. "One more

day of grace! One more day of silence, broken only by the lover's sigh and the

tattoo of horses' hoofs!"

"One more day of your bullshit," Alain said. "Come on."

They set off across the doorway, sensing the eight pairs of eyes on them not at all.

They walked into the stable past the two men flanking the door, one hidden behind

an ancient harrow, the other tucked behind an untidy stack of hay, both with guns

drawn.

Only Rusher sensed something was wrong. He stamped his feet, rolled his eyes,

and, as Roland backed him out of his stall, tried to rear.

"Hey, boy," he said, and looked around. "Spiders, I reckon. He hates them."

Outside, Lengyll stood up and waved both hands forward. Men moved silently

toward the front of the stable. On the roof, Dave Hollis stood with his gun drawn.

His monocle was tucked away in his vest pocket, so it should blink no badly timed

reflection.

Cuthbert led his mount out of the stable. Alain followed. Roland came last, short-

leading the nervous, prancing gelding.

"Look," Cuthbert said cheerily, still unaware of the men standing directly behind

him and his friends. He was pointing north. "A cloud in the

shape of a bear! Good

luck for—“

”Don’t move, cul?lies,” Fran Lengyll called. ”Don’t so much as shuf fle yer god-

pound?ing feet.”

Alain did be?gin to turn—in startle?ment more than any?thing else—and there was a

rip?ple of small click?ing sounds, like many dry twigs all snap ping at once. The

sound of cock?ing pis?tols and mus?ke?toons.

”No, Al!” Roland said. ”Don’t move! Don’t!” In his throat de?spair rose like poi?son,

and tears of rage stung at the com?ers of his eyes ... yet he stood qui?et. Cuth?bert and

Alain must stand qui?et, too. If they moved, they’d be killed. ”Don’t move!” he

called again. ”Ei?ther of you!”

”Wise, cul?ly.” Lengyll’s voice was clos?er now, and ac?com?pa?nied by sev?er?al pairs

of foot?falls. ”Put yer hands be?hind ye.”

Two shad?ows flanked Roland, long in the first light. Judg?ing by the bulk of the

one on his left, he guessed it was be?ing thrown by Sher?iff Av?ery. He prob?ably

wouldn’t be of?fer?ing them any white tea this day. Lengyll would be?long to the

oth?er shad?ow.

”Hur?ry up, Dear?born, or what?ev?er yer name may be. Get em be?hind ye. Small of

yer back. There’s guns point?ed at your pards, and if we end up tak?ing in on?ly two

of yer in?stead of three, life’ll go on.”

Not tak?ing any chances with us, Roland thought, and felt a mo?ment of per?verse

pride. With it came a taste of some?thing that was al?most amuse ment. Bit?ter,

though; that taste con?tin?ued very bit?ter.

”Roland!” It was Cuth?bert, and there was agony in his voice. ”Ro land, don’t!”

But there was no choice. Roland put his hands be?hind his back. Rush?er ut?tered a

small, re?prov?ing whin?ny as if to say all this was high?ly im?prop?er—and trot?ted

away to stand be?side the bunkhouse porch.

”You’re go?ing to feel met?al on your wrists,” Lengyll said. ”Es?

posas.”

Two cold circles slipped over Roland's hands. I here was a click and suddenly the

arcs of the handcuffs were tight against his wrists.

“All right,” said another voice. “Now you, son,”

“Be damned if I will!” Cuthbert's voice wavered on the edge of hysteria

There was a thud and a muffled cry of pain. Roland turned around and saw Alain

down on one knee, the heel of his left hand pressed against his forehead. Blood ran

down his face.

“Ye want me to deal him another ‘un?” Jake White asked. He had an old pistol in

his hand, reversed so the butt was forward. “I can, you know; my arm is feeling

very limber for this early in the day.”

“No!” Cuthbert was twitching with horror and something like grief. Ranged

behind him were three armed men, looking on with nervous avidity.

“Then be a good boy an' get yer hands behind yer.”

Cuthbert, still fighting tears, did as he was told. Esposas were put on him by

Deputy Bridger. The other two men yanked Alain to his feet. He reeled a little,

then stood firm as he was handcuffed. His eyes met Roland's, and Al tried to

smile. In some ways it was the worst moment of that terrible ambush morning.

Roland nodded back and made himself a promise: he would never be taken like

this again, not if he lived to be a thousand years old.

Lengyll was wearing a trailscarf instead of a string tie this morning, but Roland

thought he was inside the same box-tail coat he'd worn to the Mayor's welcoming

party, all those weeks ago. Standing beside him, puffing with excitement, anxiety,

and self-importance, was Sheriff Avery.

“Boys,” the Sheriff said, “ye're arrested for transgressing the Barony. The specific

charges are treason and murder.”

“Who did we murder?” Alain asked mildly, and one of the posse uttered a laugh

either shocked or cynical, Roland couldn't tell which.

"The May?or and his Chan?cel?lor, as ye know quite well," Av?ery said. "Now—"

"How can you do this?" Roland asked cu?ri?ous?ly. It was Lengyll to whom he spoke. "Mejis is your home place; I've seen the line of your fathers in the town

come?tery. How can you do this to your home place, sai Lengyll?"

"I've no in?ten?tion of stand?ing out here and mak?ing palaver with ye," Lengyll said.

He glanced over Roland's shoul?der. "Al?varez! Get his horse! Boys as trig as this

bunch should have no prob?lem rid?ing with their hands be?hind their—"

"No, tell me," Roland in?ter?posed. "Don't hold back, sai Lengyll — these are your

friends you've come with, and not a one who isn't in?side your cir?cle. How can you

do it? Would you rape your own moth?er if you came up?on her sleep?ing with her dress up?"

Lengyll's mouth twitched—not with shame or em?bar?rass?ment but mo?men?tary

prud?ish dis?taste, and then the old ranch?er looked at Av?ery. "They teach em to talk

pret?ty in Gilead, don't they?"

Av?ery had a ri?fle. Now he stepped to?ward the hand?cuffed gun?slinger with the butt

raised. "I'll teach 'im how to talk prop?er to a man of the gen try, so I will! Knock

the teef straight out of his head, if you say aye, Fran!"

Lengyll held him back, look?ing tired. "Don't be a fool. I don't want to bring him

back lay?ing over a sad?dle un?less he's dead."

Av?ery low?ered his gun. Lengyll turned to Roland.

"Ye're not go?ing to live long enough to prof?it from ad?vice, Dear born," he said,

"but I'll give'ee some, any?way: stick with the win?ners in this world. And know

how the wind blows, so ye can tell when it changes di?rec?tion."

"You've for?got?ten the face of your fa?ther, you scur?ry?ing lit?tle mag got," Cuth?bert said clear?ly.

This got to Lengyll in a way Roland's re?mark about his moth?er had not—it showed

in the sud?den bloom of col?or in his weath?ered cheeks.

"Get em mount?ed!" he said. "I want em locked up tight with?in the hour!"

5

Roland was boost?ed in?to Rush?er's sad?dle so hard he al?most flew off on the oth?er

side—would have, if Dave Hol?lis had not been there to steady him and then to

wedge Roland's boot in?to the stir?rup. Dave of?fered the gun?slinger a ner?vous, half-em?bar?rassed smile.

"I'm sor?ry to see you here," Roland said grave?ly.

"It's sor?ry I am to be here," the deputy said. "If mur?der was your busi ness, I wish

you'd got?ten to it soon?er. And your friend shouldn't have been so ar?ro?gant as to

leave his call?ing-card." He nod?ded to?ward Cuth?bert.

Roland hadn't the slight?est idea what Deputy Dave was re?fer?ring to, but it didn't

mat?ter. It was just part of the frame, and none of these men be?lieved much of it,

Dave like?ly in?clud?ed. Al?though, Roland sup?posed, they would come to be?lieve it

in lat?er years and tell it to their chil?dren and grand?chil?dren as gospel. The glo?ri?ous

day they'd rid?den with the posse and tak?en down the traitors.

The gun?slinger used his knees to turn Rush?er . . . and there, stand?ing by the gate

be?tween the Bar K's door?yard and the lane lead?ing to the Great Road, was Jonas

him?self. He sat astride a deep?chest?ed bay, wear ing a green felt drover's hat and

an old gray duster. There was a ri?fle in the scab?bard be?side his right knee. The left

side of the duster was pulled back to ex?pose the butt of his re?volver. Jonas's white

hair, un?tied to?day, lay over his shoul?ders.

He doffed his hat and held it out to Roland in court?ly greet?ing. "A good game," he

said. "You played very well for some?one who was tak?ing his milk out of a tit not

so long ago."

"Old man," Roland said, "you've lived too long."

Jonas smiled. "You'd rem?edy that if you could, wouldn't you? Yar, I reckon." He

flicked his eyes at Lengyll. "Get their toys, Fran. Look specialy sharp for knives.

They've got guns, but not with em. Yet I know a bit more about those shoot'ing

irons than they might think. And fun?ny boy's sling?shot. Don't for?get that, for gods'

sake. He like to take Roy's head off with it not so long ago."

"Are you talk'ing about the car?rot-?top?" Cuth?bert asked. His horse was danc'ing

un?der him; Bert swayed back and forth and from side to side like a cir?cus rid?er to

keep from tum?bling off. "He nev?er would have missed his head. His balls, maybe,

but not his head."

"Prob?ably true," Jonas agreed, watch'ing as the spears and Roland's short?bow were

tak?en in?to cus?today. The sling?shot was on the back of Cuth bert's belt, tucked in?to a

hol?ster he had made for it him?self. It was very well for Roy De?pape that he hadn't

tried Bert, Roland knew—Bert could take a bird on the wing at six?ty yards. A

pouch hold'ing steel shot hung at the boy's left side. Bridger took it, as well.

While this was go'ing on, Jonas fixed Roland with an ami?able smile. "What's your

re?al name, brat? Fess up—no harm in telling now; you're go'ing to ride the

hand?some, and we both know it."

Roland said noth'ing. Lengyll looked at Jonas, eye?brows raised. Jonas shrugged,

then jerked his head in the di?rec?tion of town. Lengyll nod ded and poked Roland

with one hard, chapped fin?ger. "Come on, boy. Let's ride."

Roland squeezed Rush?er's sides; the horse trot?ted to?ward Jonas. And sud?den?ly

Roland knew some?thing. As with all his best and truest in?tu itions, it came from

nowhere and ev?ery?where—ab?sent at one sec?ond, all there and ful?ly dressed at the

next.

"Who sent you west, mag?got?" he asked as he passed Jonas. "Couldn't have been

Cort—you're too old. Was it his fa?ther?"

The look of slight?ly bored amuse?ment left Jonas's face—flew

from his face, as if

slapped away. For one amazing moment the man with the white hair was a child

again: shocked, shamed, and hurt.

"Yes, Cort's da—I see it in your eyes. And now you're here, on the Clean Sea ...

except you're really in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west."

Jonas's gun was out and cocked in his hand with such speed that only Roland's

extraordinary eyes were capable of marking the movement. There was a murmur

from the men behind them—partly shock, mostly awe.

"Jonas, don't be a fool!" Lengyll snarled. "You ain't killin' em after we took the

time and risk to hood em and tie their hooks, are ye?"

Jonas seemed to take no notice. His eyes were wide; the corners of his seamed

mouth were trembling. "Watch your words, Will Dearborn," he said in a low,

hoarse voice. "You want to watch em ever so close. I got two pounds of pressure

on a three-pound trigger right this second."

"Fine, shoot me," Roland said. He lifted his head and looked down at Jonas.

"Shoot, exile. Shoot, worm. Shoot, you failure. You'll still live in exile and die as you lived."

For a moment he was sure Jonas would shoot, and in that moment Roland felt

death would be enough, an acceptable end after the shame of being caught so

easily. In that moment Susan was absent from his mind. Nothing breathed in that

moment, nothing called, nothing moved. The shadows of the men watching this

confrontation, both on foot and on horseback, were printed depthless on the dirt.

Then Jonas dropped the hammer of his gun and slipped it back into its holster.

"Take em to town and jug em," he said to Lengyll. "And when I show up, I don't

want to see one hair harmed on one head. If I could keep from killing this one, you

can keep from hurt?ing the rest. Now go on."

"Move," Lengyll said. His voice had lost some of its bluff authority. It was now

the voice of a man who realizes (too late) that he has bought chips in a game

where the stakes are likely much too high.

They rode. As they did, Roland turned one last time. The contempt Jonas saw in

those cool young eyes stung him worse than the whips that had scarred his back in

Gar?lan years ago.

6

When they were out of sight, Jonas went into the bunkhouse, pulled up the board

which concealed their little armory, and found only two guns. The matched set of

six-shooters with the dark handles—Dearborn's guns, surely—were gone.

You're in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west. You'll

live in exile and die as you lived.

Jonas's hands went to work, disassembling the revolvers Cuthbert and Alain had

brought west. Alain's had never even been worn, save on the practice-range.

Outside, Jonas threw the pieces, scattering them every which way. He threw as

hard as he could, trying to rid himself of that cool blue gaze and the shock of

hearing what he'd believed no man had known. Roy and Clay suspected, but even

they hadn't known for sure.

Before the sun went down, everyone in Mejis would know that Eldred Jonas, the

white-haired regulator with the tattooed coffin on his hand, was nothing but a

failed gun-slinger.

You'll live in exile and die as you lived.

"P'raps," he said, looking at the burned-out ranch house without really seeing it.

"But I'll live longer than you, young Dearborn, and die long after your bones are

rusting in the ground."

He mounted up and swung his horse around, swinging viciously at the reins. He rode

for Cit?go, where Roy and Clay would be wait?ing, and he rode hard, but Roland's eyes rode with him.

7

"Wake up! Wake up, sai! Wake up! Wake up!"

At first the words seemed to be com?ing from far away, drift?ing down by some

mag?ical means to the dark place where she lay. Even when the voice was joined

by a rude?ly shak?ing hand and Su?san knew she must wake up, it was a long, hard struggle.

It had been weeks since she'd got?ten a de?cent night's sleep, and she had ex?pect?ed

more of the same last night. . . es?pe?cial?ly last night. She had lain awake in her

lux?uri?ous bed?cham?ber at Seafront, toss?ing from side to side, pos?si?bil?ities—none

good—crowd?ing her mind. The night?gown she wore crept up to her hips and

bunched at the small of her back. When she got up to use the com?mode, she took

the hate?ful thing off, hurled it in?to a com?er, and crawled back in?to bed naked.

Be?ing out of the heavy silk night?gown had done the trick. She dropped off al?most

at once . . . and in this case, dropped off was, ex?act?ly right: it was less like falling

asleep than falling in?to some thought?less, dream?less crack in the earth.

Now this in?trud?ing voice. This in?trud?ing arm, shak?ing her so hard that her head

rolled from side to side on the pil?low. Su?san tried to slide away from it, pulling her

knees up to her chest and mouthing fuzzy protests, but the arm fol?lowed. The

shak?ing recom?menced; the nag?ging, call?ing voice nev?er stopped.

"Wake up, sai! Wake up! In the name of the Tur?tle and the Bear, wake up!"

Maria's voice. Su?san hadn't rec?og?nized it at first be?cause Maria was so up?set.

Su?san had nev?er heard her so, or ex?pect?ed to. Yet it was so; the maid sound?ed on

the verge of hys?te?ria.

Su?san sat up. For a mo?ment so much in?put—all of it wrong—crashed in on her

that she was in?ca?pable of mov?ing. The du?vet be?neath which she had slept tum?bled

in?to her lap, ex?pos?ing her breasts, and she could do no more than pluck weak?ly at

it with the tips of her fin?gers.

The first wrong thing was the light. It flood?ed through the win?dows more strong?ly

than it ev?er had be?fore . . . be?cause, she re?al?ized, she had nev?er been in this room

so late be?fore. Gods, it had to be ten o' the clock, per?haps lat?er.

The sec?ond wrong thing was the sounds from be?low. May?or's House was

or?di?nar?ily a peace?ful place in the morn?ing; un?til noon one heard lit?tle but casa

va?que?ros lead?ing the hors?es out for their morn?ing ex?er?cise, the whick?er-?whick?er-

whick of Miguel sweep?ing the court?yard, and the con stant boom and shush of the

waves. This morn?ing there were shouts, curs?es, gal?lop?ing hors?es, the oc?ca?sion?al

burst of strange, jagged laugh?ter. Some?where out?side her room—per?haps not in

this wing, but close— Su?san heard the run?ning thud of boot?ed feet.

The wrongest thing of all was Maria her?self, cheeks ashy be?neath her olive skin-

tone, and her usu?al?ly neat hair tan?gled and un?bound. Su?san would have guessed

on?ly an earth?quake could make her look so, if that.

“Maria, what is it?”

“You have to go, sai. Seafront maybe not safe for you just now. Your own house

maybe bet?ter. When I don't see you ear?li?er, I think you gone there al?ready. You

chose a bad day to sleep late.”

“Go?” Su?san asked. Slow?ly, she pulled the du?vet all the way up to her nose and

stared at Maria over it with wide, puffy eyes. “What do you mean, go?”

“Out the back.” Maria plucked the du?vet from Su?san's sleep?numbed hands again

and this time stripped it all the way down to her an?kles. “Like

you did be?fore.

Now, mis?sy, now! Dress and go! Those boys put away, aye, but what if they have

friends? What if they come back, kill you, too?“

Su?san had been get?ting up. Now all the strength ran out of her legs and she sat

back down on the bed again. ”Boys?“ she whis?pered. ”Boys kill who? Boys kill who?“

This was a good dis?tance from gram?mat?ical, but Maria took her mean?ing.

”Dear?born and his pin?boys,“ she said.

”Who are they sup?posed to have killed?“

”The May?or and the Chan?cel?lor.“ She looked at Su?san with a kind of dis?tract?ed

sym?pa?thy. ”Now get up, I tell you. And get gone. This place gone lo?co.“

”They didn’t do any such thing,“ Su?san said, and on?ly just re?strained her?self from

adding, It wasn’t in the plan.

”Sai Thorin and sai Rimer jus’ as dead, who?ev?er did it.“ There were more shouts

be?low, and a sharp lit?tle ex?plo?sion that didn’t sound like a fire?crack?er. Maria

looked in that di?rec?tion, then be?gan to throw Su?san her clothes. ”The May?or’s

eyes, they gouged right out of his head.“

”They couldn’t have! Maria, I know them—“

”Me, I don’t know noth?ing about them and care less—but I care about you. Get

dressed and get out, I tell you. Quick as you can.“

”What’s hap?pened to them?“ A ter?ri?ble thought came to Su?san and she leaped to

her feet, clothes falling all around her. She seized Maria by the shoul?ders. ”They

haven’t been killed?“ Su?san shook her. ”Say they haven’t been killed!“

”I don’t think so. There’s been a t’ou?san’ shouts and ten t’ou?san’ ru mors go the

rounds, but I think jus’ jailed. On?ly . . .“

There was no need for her to fin?ish; her eyes slipped from Su?san’s, and that

in?vol?un?tary shift (along with the con?fused shouts from be?low) told all the rest. Not

killed yet, but Hart Thorin had been great?ly liked, and from an

old family. Roland,

Cuthbert, and Alain were strangers.

Not killed yet ... but tomorrow was Reaping, and tomorrow night was Reaping

Bonfire.

Susan began to dress as fast as she could.

8

Reynolds, who had been with Jonas longer than De-pape, took one look at the

figure canteering toward them through the skeletal oil derricks, and turned to his

partner. "Don't ask him any questions—he's not in any mood for silly questions

this morning."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. Just keep your ever-fucking gob shut."

Jonas reined up before them. He sat slumped in his saddle, pale and thoughtful.

His look prompted one question from Roy De-pape in spite of Reynolds's caution.

"Elfred, are you all right?"

"Is anyone?" Jonas responded, then fell silent again. Behind them, Citgo's few

remaining pumpers squalled tiredly.

At last Jonas roused himself and sat a little straighter in the saddle. "The cubs'll be

stored supplies by now. I told Lengyll and Avery to fire a double set of pistols-

shots if anything went wrong, and there hasn't been any shooting like that."

"We didn't hear none, either, Elfred," De-pape said eagerly. "Nothing at all like that."

Jonas grimaced. "You wouldn't, would you? Not out in this noise.

Fool!"

De-pape bit his lip, saw something in the neighborhood of his left stirrup that

needed adjusting, and bent to it.

"Were you boys seen at your business?" Jonas asked. "This morning, I mean,

when you sent Rimer and Thorin off. Even a chance either of you was seen?"

Reynolds shook his head for both of them. " 'Twas clean as could be."

Jonas nodded as if the subject had been of only passing interest to him, then turned

to regard the oilpatch and the rusty dericks. "Maybe folks are right," he said in a

voice almost too low to hear. "Maybe the Old People were devils." He turned

back to them. "Well, we're the devils now. Ain't we. Clay?"

"Whatever you think, Elfred," Reynolds said.

"I said what I think. We're the devils now, and by God, that's how we'll behave.

What about Quint and that lot down there?" He cocked his head toward the

forested slope where the ambush had been laid.

"Still there, pending your word," Reynolds said.

"No need of em now." He favored Reynolds with a dark look. "That Dearborn's a

cooey brat. I wish I was going to be in Ham-bry tomorrow night just so I could lay

a torch between his feet. I almost left him cold and dead at the Bar K. Would've if

not for Lengyll. Cooey little brat is what he is."

Slumping as he spoke. Face growing blacker and blacker, like storm clouds

drifting across the sun. Deeply, his stirrup fixed, tossed Reynolds a nervous

glance. Reynolds didn't answer it. What point? If Elfred went crazy now (and

Reynolds had seen it happen before), there was no way they could get out of his

killing-zone in time.

"Elfred, we got quite a spot more to do."

Reynolds spoke quietly, but it got through. Jonas straightened. He took off his hat,

hung it on his saddle as if the horn were a coat hook, and brushed absently through

his hair with his fingers.

"Yar—quite a spot is right. Ride down there. Tell Quint to send for oxen to pull

those last two full tankers out to Hanging Rock. He should keep four men with him

to hook em up and take em on to Lati-go. The rest can go on ahead."

Reynolds now judged it safe to ask a question. "When do the rest of Lati-go's men

get there?"

"Men?" Jonas snorted. "Don't we wish, cul?ly! The rest of Lati? go's boys'll ride out

to Hang?ing Rock by moon?light, pen?nons no doubt fly?ing for all the coy?otes and

oth?er as?sort?ed desert-?dogs to see and be awed by. They'll be ready to do es?cort

du?ty by ten to?mor?row, I sh'd think ... al though if they're the sort of lads I'm

ex?pect?ing, fuck-?ups are apt to be the rule of the day. The good news is that we

don't much need em, any?way. Things look well in hand. Now go down there, get

them about their busi ness, and then ride back to me, just as fast's you can."

Jonas turned and looked to?ward the lumpy swell of hills to the north?west.

"We have busi?ness of our own," he said. "Soon?est be?gun, boys, soon est done. I

want to shake the dust of fuck?ing Mejis off my hat and boots as soon as I can. I

don't like the way it feels any?more. Not at all."

9

The wom?an, There?sa Maria Do?lores O'Shyven, was forty years old, plump, pret?ty,

moth?er of four, hus?band of Pe?ter, a va?que?ro of laugh?ing tem?pera ment. She was

al?so a sell?er of rugs and draperies in the Up?per Mar?ket; many of the pret?ti?er and

more del?icate ap?point?ments at Seafront had passed through There?sa O'Shyven's

hands, and her fam?ily was quite well-?to-?do. Al?though her hus?band was a range-

rid?er, the O'Shyven clan was what would have been called mid?dle-?class in an?oth?er

place and time. Her two old?est chil?dren were grown and gone, one right out o'

Barony. The third el?dest was spark?ing and hop?ing to mar?ry his heart's de?light at

Year's End. On?ly the youngest sus?pect?ed some?thing was wrong with Ma, and this

one had no idea how close There?sa was to com?plete ob?ses? sion?al mad?ness.

Soon, Rhea thought, watch?ing There?sa avid?ly in the ball. She 'II start do?ing it

soon, but first she's got to get rid of the brat.

There was no school at Reap?tide, and the stalls opened on?ly for a few hours in the

af?ter?noon, so There?sa sent her youngest daugh?ter off with a pie. A Reap?tide gift to

a neigh?bor, Rhea sur?mised, al?though she couldn't hear the sound?less in?struc?tions

the wom?an gave her daugh?ter as she pulled a knit?ted cap down over the girl's ears.

And 'twouldn't be a neigh?bor too close, ei?ther; she'd want time, would There?sa

Maria Do?lores O'Shyven, time to be a-?chor?ing. It was a good-?sized house, and

there were a lot of cor?ners in it that need?ed clean?ing.

Rhea chuck?led; the chuck?le turned in?to a hol?low gust of cough?ing. In the cor?ner,

Musty looked at the old wom?an haunt?ed?ly. Al?though far from the ema?ci?at?ed

skele?ton that his mis?tress had be?come, Musty didn't look good at all.

The girl was shown out with the pie un?der her arm; she paused to give her moth?er

a sin?gle trou?bled look, and then the door was shut in her face.

"Now!" Rhea croaked. "Them com?ers is wait?in! Down on yer knees, wom?an, and get to busi?ness!"

First There?sa went to the win?dow. When she was sat?is?fied with what she saw—her

daugh?ter out the gate and down the High Street, like?ly—she turned back to her

kitchen. She walked to the ta?ble and stood there, look ing dreamy-?eyed in?to space.

"No, none o' that, now!" Rhea cried im?pa?tient?ly. She no longer saw her own filthy

hut, she no longer smelled ei?ther its rank aro?mas or her own. She had gone in?to the

Wiz?ard's Rain?bow. She was with There?sa O'Shyven, whose cot?tage had the

clean?est com?ers in all Mejis. May?hap in all Mid-?World.

"Hur?ry, wom?an!" Rhea half-?screamed. "Get to yer house? work!"

As if hear?ing, There?sa un?but?toned her house?dress, stepped out of it, and laid it

neat?ly over a chair. She pulled the hem of her clean, mend?ed shift up over her

knees, went to the com?er, and got down on all fours. "That's it,

my cora?zon!” Rhea

cried, near?ly chok?ing on a phlegmy mix?ture of cough?ing and laugh?ter. “Do yer

chores, now, and do em wery pert!”

There?sa O’Shyven poked her head for?ward to the full length of her neck, opened

her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and be?gan to lick the cor ner. She lapped it as

Musty lapped his milk. Rhea watched this, slap?ping her knee and whoop?ing, her

face grow?ing red?der and red?der as she rocked from side to side. Oh, There?sa was

her fa?vorite, aye! No doubt! For hours now she would crawl about on her hands

and knees with her ass in the air, lick?ing in?to the com?ers, pray?ing to some ob?scure

god—not even the Man-?Je?sus God—for for?give?ness of who knew what as she did

this, her penance. Some?times she got splin?ters in her tongue and had to pause to

spit blood in?to the kitchen basin. Up un?til now some sixth sense had al?ways got?ten

her to her feet and back in?to her dress be?fore any of her fam?ily re?turned, but Rhea

knew that soon?er or lat?er the wom?an’s ob?ses sion would take her too far, and she

would be sur?prised. Per?haps to?day would be the day—the lit?tle girl would come

back ear?ly, per?haps for a coin to spend in town, and dis?cov?er her moth?er down on

her knees and lick?ing the com?ers. Oh, what a spin and ra?ree! How Rhea want?ed to

see it! How she longed to—

Sud?den?ly There?sa O’Shyven was gone. The in?te?ri?or of her neat lit?tle cot?tage was

gone. Ev?ery?thing was gone, lost in cur?tains of shift?ing pink light. For the first time

in weeks, the wiz?ard’s glass had gone blank.

Rhea picked the ball up in her scrawny, long?-nailed fin?gers and shook it. “What’s

wrong with you, plaguey thing? What’s wrong?”

The ball was heavy, and Rhea’s strength was fad?ing. Af?ter two or three hard

shakes, it slipped in her grip. She cra?dled it against the de?flat?ed re?mains of her

breasts, trem?bling.

“No, no, lovey,” she crooned. “Come back when ye’re ready, aye, Rhea lost her

tem?per a bit but she’s got it back now, she nev?er meant to shake ye and she’d nev?er

ev?er drop ye, so ye just—”

She broke off and cocked her head, lis?ten?ing. Hors?es ap?proach?ing. No, not

ap?proach?ing; here. Three rid?ers, by the sound. They had crept up on her while she

was dis?tract?ed.

The boys? Those plaguey boys?

Rhea held the ball against her bo?som, eyes wide, lips wet. Her hands were now so

thin that the ball’s pink glow shone through them, faint?ly il lu?mi?nat?ing the dark

spokes that were her bones.

“Rhea! Rhea of the Coos!”

No, not the boys.

“Come out here, and bring what you were giv?en!”

Worse.

“Far?son wants his prop?er?ty! We’ve come to take it!”

Not the boys but the Big Cof?fin Hunters.

“Nev?er, ye dirty old white-?haired prick,” she whis?pered. “Ye’ll nev?er take it.” Her

eyes moved from side to side in small, shoot?ing peeks. Scrag?gle-?head?ed and

trem?ble-?mouthed, she looked like a dis?eased coy?ote driv?en in?to its fi?nal ar?royo.

She looked down at the ball and a whin?ing noise be?gan to es?cape her. Now even

the pink glow was gone. The sphere was as dark as a corpse’s eye?ball.

10

A shriek came from the hut.

De?pape turned to Jonas with wide eyes, his skin prick?ling. The thing which had

ut?tered that cry hard?ly sound?ed hu?man.

“Rhea!” Jonas called again. “Bring it out here now, wom?an, and hand it over! I’ve

no time to play games with you!”

The door of the hut swung open. De?pape and Reynolds drew their guns as the old

crone stepped out, blink?ing against the sun?light like some thing that’s spent its

whole life in a cave. She was hold?ing John Far?son's fa?vorite toy high over her

head. There were plen?ty of rocks in the door?yard she could throw it against, and

even if her aim was bad and she missed them all, it might smash any?way.

This could be bad, and Jonas knew it—there were some peo?ple you just couldn't

threat?en. He had fo?cused so much of his at?ten?tion on the brats (who, iron?ical?ly,

had been tak?en as easy as milk) that it had nev?er oc?curred to him to wor?ry much

about this part of it. And Kim?ba Rimer, the man who had sug?gest?ed Rhea as the

per?fect cus?to?di?an for Maer?lyn's Rain?bow, was dead. Couldn't lay it at Rimer's

doorstep if things went wrong up here, could he?

Then, just to make things a lit?tle worse when he'd have thought they'd gone as far

west as they could with?out drop?ping off the cold end of the earth, he heard the

cock?ing sound of De?pape draw?ing the ham?mer of his gun.

"Put that away, you id?iot!" he snarled.

"But look at her!" De?pape al?most moaned. "Look at her, El?dred!"

He was. The thing in?side the black dress ap?peared to be wear?ing the corpse of a

pu?tre?fy?ing snake around its throat for a neck?lace. She was so scrawny that she

re?sem?bled noth?ing so much as a walk?ing skele?ton. Her peel?ing skull was on?ly

tuft?ed with hair; the rest had fall?en out. Sores clus?tered on her cheeks and brow,

and there was a mark like a spi?der-?bite on the left side of her mouth. Jonas thought

that last might be a scurvy-?bloom, but he didn't re?al?ly care one way or an?oth?er.

What he cared about was the ball up?raised in the dy?ing wom?an's long and

shiv?er?ing claws.

11

The sun?light so daz?zled Rhea's eyes that she didn't see the gun point?ed at her, and

when her vi?sion cleared, De?pape had put it away again. She looked at the men

lined up across from her—the be?spec?ta?cled red?head, the one in the cloak, and Old

White-?Hair Jonas—and ut?tered a dusty croak of laugh?ter. Had she been afraid of

them, these mighty Cof?fin Hunters? She sup?posed she had, but for gods’ sake,

why? They were men, that was all, just more men, and she had been beat?ing such

all her life. Oh, they thought they ruled the roost, all right—no?body in Mid-?World

ac cused any?one of for?get?ting the face of his moth?er—but they were poor things, at

bot?tom, moved to tears by a sad song, ut?ter?ly un?done by the sight of a bare breast,

and all the more ca?pa?ble of be?ing ma?nip?ulat?ed sim ply be?cause they were so sure

they were strong and tough and wise.

The glass was dark, and as much as she hat?ed that dark?ness, it had cleared her

mind.

“Jonas!” she cried. “El?dred Jonas!”

“I’m here, old moth?er,” he said. “Long days and pleas?ant nights.”

“Nev?er mind yer sops, time’s too short for em.” She came four steps far?ther and

stopped with the ball still held over her head. Near her, a gray chunk of stone

jut?ted from the weedy ground. She looked at it, then back at Jonas. The

im?pli?ca?tion was un?spo?ken but un?mis?tak?able.

“What do you want?” Jonas asked.

“The ball’s gone dark,” she said, an?swer?ing from the side. “All the time I had it in

my keep?ing, it was live?ly—aye, even when it showed noth?ing I could make out, it

was pass?ing live?ly, bright and pink—but it fell dark al?most at the sound of yer

voice. It doesn’t want to go with ye.”

”Nev?er?the?less, I’m un?der or?ders to take it.“ Jonas’s voice be?came soft and

con?cil?iat?ing. It wasn’t the tone he used when he was in bed with Coral, but it was

close. ”Think a minute, and you’ll see my sit?ua?tion. Far-?son wants it, and who am I

to stand against the wants of a man who’ll be the most pow?er?

ful in Mid-?World

when De?mon Moon ris?es next year? If I come back with?out it and say Rhea of the

Coos re?fused me it, I'll be killed."

"If ye come back and tell him I broke it in yer ug?ly old face, ye'll be killed, too,"

Rhea said. She was close enough for Jonas to see how far her sick?ness had eat?en

in?to her. Above the few re?main?ing tufts of her hair, the wretched ball was

trem?bling back and forth. She wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. A minute at

most. Jonas felt a dew of sweat spring out on his fore?head.

"Aye, moth?er. But d'you know, giv?en a choice of deaths, I'd choose to take the

cause of my prob?lem with me. That's you, dar?ling."

She croaked again—that dusty repli?ca of laugh?ter—and nod?ded ap pre?cia?tive?ly. "

"Twon't do Far?son any good with?out me in any case," she said. "It's found its

mis?tress, I wot—that's why it went dark at the sound of yer voice."

Jonas won?dered how many oth?ers had be?lieved the ball was just for them. He

want?ed to wipe the sweat from his brow be?fore it ran in his eyes, but kept his

hands in front of him, fold?ed neat?ly on the horn of his sad?dle.

He didn't dare look at ei?ther Reynolds or De?pape. and could on?ly hope they would

leave the play to him. She was bal?anced on both a phys?ical and men?tal knife-?edge;

the small?est move?ment would send her tum?bling off in one di?rec?tion or the oth?er.

"Found the one it wants, has it?" He thought he saw a way out of this. If he was

lucky. And it might be lucky for her, as well. "What should we do about that?"

"Take me with ye." Her face twist?ed in?to an ex?pres?sion of grue?some greed; she

looked like a corpse that is try?ing to sneeze. She doesn't re?al?ize she's dy?ing, Jonas

thought. Thank the gods for that. "Take the ball, but take me, as well. I'll go with

ye to Far?son. I'll be?come his sooth?say?er, and noth?ing will stand be?fore us, not with

me to read the ball for him. Take me with ye!"

"All right," Jonas said. It was what he had hoped for. "Al-
though what Far?son

de?cides is none o' mine. You know that?"

"Aye."

"Good. Now give me the ball. I'll give it back in?to your keep?
ing, if you like, but I

need to make sure it's whole."

She slow?ly low?ered it. Jonas didn't think it was en?tire?ly safe
even cra?dled in her

arms, but he breathed a lit?tle eas?ier when it was, all the same.
She shuf?led to?ward

him, and he had to con?trol an urge to gig his horse back from
her.

He bent over in the sad?dle, hold?ing his hands out for the glass.
She looked up at

him, her old eyes still shrewd be?hind their crust?ed lids. One of
them ac?tu?al?ly drew

down in a con?spir?ator's wink. "I know yer mind, Jonas. Ye
think, 'I'll take the ball,

then draw my gun and kill her, what harm?' Isn't that true? Yet
there would be

harm, and all to you and yours. Kill me and the ball will nev?er
shine for Far?son

again. For some?one, aye, some?day, may?hap; but not for him .
. . and will he let ye

live if ye bring his toy back and he dis?cov?ers it's bro?ken?"

Jonas had al?ready con?sid?ered this. "We have a bar?gain, old
moth?er. You go west

with the glass ... un?less you die be?side the trail some night.
You'll par?don me for

say?ing so, but you don't look well."

She cack?led. "I'm bet?ter'n I look, oh yar! Years left 'fore this
clock o' mine runs

down!"

I think you may be wrong about that, old moth?er, Jonas
thought. But he kept his

peace and on?ly held his hands out for the ball.

For a mo?ment longer she held it. Their ar?range?ment was
made and agreed to on

both sides, but in the end she could bare?ly bring her?self to un?
grasp the ball. Greed

shone in her eyes like moon?light through fog.

He held his hands out pa?tient?ly, say?ing noth?ing, wait?ing
for her mind to ac?cept

re?al?ity—if she let go, there was some chance. If she held on, very like?ly ev?ery?one

in this stony, weedy yard would end up rid?ing the hand?some be?fore long.

With a sigh of re?gret, she fi?nal?ly put the ball in his hands. At the in stant it passed

from her to him, an em?ber of pink light pulsed deep in the depths of the glass. A

throb of pain drove in?to Jonas's head . . . and a shiv?er of lust coiled in his balls.

As from a great dis?tance, he heard De?pape and Reynolds cock?ing their pis?tols.

"Put those away," Jonas said. "But—" Reynolds looked con?fused.

"They thought'ee was go?ing to dou?ble-?cross Rhea," the old wom?an said, cack?ling.

"Good thing ye're in charge rather than them, Jonas ... may?hap you know sum?mat

they don't."

He knew some?thing, all right—how dan?ger?ous the smooth, glassy thing in his

hands was. It could take him in a blink, if it want?ed. And in a month, he would be

like the witch: scrawny, rad?dled with sores, and too ob?sessed to know or care.

"Put them away!" he shout?ed.

Reynolds and De?pape ex?changed a glance, then re?hol?stered their guns. "There was

a bag for this thing," Jonas said. "A draw?string bag laid in?side the box. Get it."

"Aye," Rhea said, grin?ning un?pleas?ant?ly at him. "But it won't keep the ball from

takin ye if it wants to. Ye needn't think it will." She sur veyed the oth?er two, and

her eye fixed on Reynolds. "There's a cart in my shed, and a pair of good gray

goats to pull it." She spoke to Reynolds, but her eyes kept turn?ing back to the ball,

Jonas no?ticed .. . and now his damned eyes want?ed to go there, too.

"You don't give me or?ders," Reynolds said.

"No, but I do," Jonas said. His eyes dropped to the ball, both want?ing and fear?ing

to see that pink spark of life deep in?side. Noth?ing. Cold and dark. He dragged his

gaze back up to Reynolds again. "Get the cart."

12

Reynolds heard the buzzing of flies even before he slipped through the shed's

sagging door, and knew at once that Rhea's goats had finished their days of

pulling. They lay bloated and dead in their pen, legs sticking up and the sockets of

their eyes squirming with maggots. It was impossible to know when Rhea had

last fed and watered them, but Reynolds guessed at least a week, from the smell.

Too busy watching what goes on in that glass ball to bother, he thought. And

what's she wearing that dead snake around her neck for?

"I don't want to know," he muttered from behind his pulled-up neckerchief. The

only thing he did want right now was to get the hell out of here.

He spied the cart, which was painted black and overlaid with calligraphic designs in

gold. It looked like a medicine-show wagon to Reynolds; it also looked a bit like a

hearse. He seized it by the handles and dragged it out of the shed as fast as he

could. Deppa could do the rest, by gods. Hitch his horse to the cart and haul the

old woman's stinking freight to ... where? Who knew? Eldred, maybe.

Rhea came tottering out of her hut with the drawstring bag they'd brought the ball

in, but she stopped, head cocked, listening, when Reynolds asked his question.

Jonas thought it over, then said: "Seafront to begin, I guess. Yar, that'll do for her,

and this glass bauble as well, I reckon, until the party's over tomorrow."

"Aye, Seafront, I've never been there," Rhea said, moving forward again. When

she reached Jonas's horse (which tried to shy away from her), she opened the bag.

After a moment's further consideration, Jonas dropped the ball in. It bulged round

at the bottom, making a shape like a teardrop.

Rhea wore a sly smile. "Maybe we'll meet Thorin. If so, I

might have some?thing

to show him in the Good Man's toy that'd in?ter?est him ev?er so much."

"If you meet him," Jonas said, get?ting down to help hitch De?pape's horse to the

black cart, "it'll be in a place where no mag?ic is need?ed to see far."

She looked at him, frown?ing, and then the sly smile slow?ly resur faced. "Why, I

b'lieve our May?or's met wiv a ac?ci?dent!"

"Could be," Jonas agreed.

She gig?gled, and soon the gig?gle turned in?to a full-?throat?ed cack?le. She was still

cack?ling as they drew out of the yard, cack?ling and sit?ting in the lit?tle black cart

with its ca?bal?is?tic dec?ora?tions like the Queen of Black Places on her throne.

CHAP?TER VI?II

the ash?es

1

Pan?ic is high?ly con?ta?gious, es?pe?cial?ly in sit?ua?tions when noth?ing is known and

ev?ery?thing is in flux. It was the sight of Miguel, the old mo?zo, that start?ed Su?san

down its greased slope. He was in the mid?dle of Seafront's court?yard, clutch?ing his

broom of twigs against his chest and look?ing at the rid?ers who passed to and fro

with an ex?pres?sion of per?plexed mis?ery. His som?brero was twist?ed around on his

back, and Su?san ob?served with some?thing like hor?ror that Miguel—usu?al?ly

brushed and clean and neat as a pin—was wear?ing his ser?ape in?side out. There

were tears on his cheeks, and as he turned this way and that, fol?low?ing the pass?ing

rid?ers, try?ing to hile those he rec?og?nized, she thought of a child she had once seen

tod?dle out in front of an on?com?ing stage. The child had been pulled back in time

by his fa?ther; who would pull Miguel back?

She start?ed for him, and a va?que?ro aboard a wild-?eyed spot?ted roan gal?loped so

close by her that one stir?rup ticked off her hip and the horse's tail flicked her

fore?arm. She voiced a strange-?sound?ing lit?tle chuck?le. She had been wor?ried about

Miguel and had al?most been run down her?self! Fun?ny!

She looked both ways this time, start?ed for?ward, then drew back again as a load?ed

wag?on came ca?reer?ing around the com?er, tot?ter?ing on two wheels at first. What it

was load?ed with she couldn't see—the goods in the wag?onbed were cov?ered with a

tarp -but she saw Miguel move to?ward it, still clutch?ing his broom. Su?san thought

of the child in front of the stage again and shrieked an inar?tic?ulate cry of alarm.

Miguel cringed back at the last mo?ment and the cart flew by him, bound?ed and

swayed across the court?yard, and dis?ap?peared out through the arch.

Miguel dropped his broom, clapped both hands to his cheeks, fell to his knees, and

be?gan to pray in a loud, lament?ing voice. Su?san watched him for a mo?ment, her

mouth work?ing, and then sprint?ed for the sta?bles, no longer tak?ing care to keep

against the side of the build?ing. She had caught the dis?ease that would grip al?most

all of Ham?bry by noon, and al though she man?aged to do a fair?ly apt job of

sad?dling Py?lon (on any oth?er day there would have been three sta?ble-?boys vy?ing

for the chance to help the pret?ty sai), any abil?ity to think had left her by the time

she heel-?kicked the star?tled horse in?to a run out?side the sta?ble door.

When she rode past Miguel, still on his knees and pray?ing to the bright sky with

his hands up?raised, she saw him no more than any oth?er rid?er had be?fore her.

2

She rode straight down the High Street, thump?ing her spur?less heels at Py?lon's

sides un?til the big horse was fair?ly fly?ing. Thoughts, ques?tions, pos?si?ble plans of

ac?tion ... none of those had a place in her head as she rode. She was but vague?ly

aware of the peo?ple milling in the street, al?low ing Py?lon to

weave his own path

through them. The only thing she was aware of was his name—
Roland, Roland,

Roland!—ringing in her head like a scream. Everything had
gone upside down.

The brave little knight they had made that night at the grave-
yard was broken, three

of its members jailed and with not long to live (if they even
were still alive), the

last member lost and confused, as crazy with terror as a bird
in a barn.

If her panic had held, things might have turned out in a much
different fashion.

But as she rode through the center of town and out the other
side, her way took her

toward the house she had shared with her father and her aunt.
That lady had been

watching for the very rider who now approached.

As Susan neared, the door flew open and Cordelia, dressed in
black from throat to

toe, rushed down the front walk to the street, shrieking with
either horror or

laughter. Perhaps both. The sight of her cut through the fore-
ground haze of panic

in Susan's mind . . . but not because she recognized her aunt.

"Rhea!" she cried, and drew back on the reins so violently that
the horse skidded,

reared, and almost tilted them over backward. That would
likely have crushed the

life out of his mistress, but Pyrlon managed to keep at least
his back feet, pawing at

the sky with his front ones and whinnying loudly. Susan
slung an arm around his

neck and hung on for dear life.

Cordelia Delgado, wearing her best black dress and a lace
mantilla over her hair,

stood in front of the horse as if in her own parlour, taking no
notice of the hooves

cutting the air less than two feet in front of her nose. In one
gloved hand she held a

wooden box.

Susan belatedly realized that this wasn't Rhea, but the
mistake really wasn't that

odd. Aunt Cord wasn't as thin as Rhea (not yet, anyway), and
more neatly dressed

(except for her dirty gloves—why her aunt was wearing gloves in the first place

Su?san didn't know, let alone why they looked so smudged), but the mad look in

her eyes was hor?ri?bly sim?ilar.

"Good day t'ye, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty!" Aunt Cord greet?ed her in a

cracked, vi?va?cious voice that made Su?san's heart trem?ble. Aunt Cord curt?seyed

one?hand?ed, hold?ing the lit?tle box curled against her chest with the oth?er. "Where

go ye on this fine au?tumn day? Where go ye so speedy? To no lover's arms, that

seems sure, for one's dead and the oth?er ta'en!"

Cordelia laughed again, thin lips draw?ing back from big white teeth. Horse teeth,

al?most. Her eyes glared in the sun?light.

Her mind's bro?ken, Su?san thought. Poor thing. Poor old thing.

"Did thee put Dear?born up to it?" Aunt Cord asked. She crept to Py lon's side

and looked up at Su?san with lu?mi?nous, liq?uid eyes. "Thee did, didn't thee? Aye!

Per?haps thee even gave him the knife he used, af?ter run?nin yer lips o'er it for good

luck. Ye're in it to?geth?er—why not ad?mit it? At least ad?mit thee's lain with that

boy, for I know it's true. I saw the way he looked at ye the day ye were sit?ting in

the win?dow, and the way ye looked back at him!"

Su?san said, "If ye'll have truth, I'll give it to ye. We're lovers. And we'll be man

and wife ere Year's End."

Cordelia raised one dirty glove to the blue sky and waved it as if say ing hel?lo to

the gods. She screamed with min?gled tri?umph and laugh?ter as she waved. "And

t'be wed, she thinks! Ooooo! Ye'd no doubt drink the blood of your vic?tims on the

mar?riage al?tar, too, would ye not? Oh, wicked! It makes me weep!" But in?stead of

weep?ing she laughed again, a howl of mirth in?to the blind blue face of the sky.

"We planned no mur?ders," Su?san said, draw?ing—if on?ly in her own mind—a line

of dif?ference be?tween the killings at May?or's House and the

trap they had hoped to

spring on Parson's soldiers. "And he did no murders. No, this is the business of

your friend Jonas, I wot. His plan, his filthy work."

Cordelia plunged her hand into the box she held, and Susan under stood at once

why the gloves she wore were dirty: she had been grubbing in the stove.

"I curse thee with the ashes!" Cordelia cried, flinging a black and gritty cloud of

them at Susan's leg and the hand which held Pylon's reins. "I curse thee to

darkness, both of thee! Be ye happy together, ye faithless! Ye murderers! Ye

cozeners! Ye liars! Ye fornicators! Ye lost and renounced!"

With each cry, Cordelia Delgado threw another handful of ashes. And with each

cry, Susan's mind grew clearer, colder. She held fast and allowed her aunt to pelt

her; in fact, when Pylon, feeling the gritty rain against his side, attempted to pull

away, Susan giggled him set. There were spectators now, avidly watching this old

ritual of renunciation (Sheemie was among them, eyes wide and mouth quivering),

but Susan barely noticed. Her mind was her own again, she had an idea of what to

do, and for that alone she supposed she owed her aunt some sort of thanks.

"I forgive ye, Aunt," she said.

The box of stove-ashes, now almost empty, tumbled from Cordelia's hands as if

Susan had slapped her. "What?" she whispered. "What does thee say?"

"For what ye did to yer brother and my father," Susan said. "For what ye were a

part of."

She rubbed a hand on her leg and bent with the hand held out before her. Before

her aunt could pull away, Susan had wiped ashes down one of her cheeks. The

smudge stood out there like a wide, dark scar. "But wear that, all the same," she

said. "Wash it off if ye like, but I think ye'll wear it in yer heart yet awhile." She

paused. "I think ye al?ready do. Good?bye."

"Where does thee think thee's go?ing?" Aunt Cord was paw?ing at the soot?mark on

her face with one gloved hand, and when she lunged for ward in an at?tempt to

grasp Py?lon's reins, she stum?bled over the box and al?most fell. It was Su?san, still

bent over to her aunt's side, who grasped her shoul?der and held her up. Cordelia

pulled back as if from the touch of an adder. "Not to him! Ye'll not go to him now,

ye mad goose!"

Su?san turned her horse away. "None of yer busi?ness. Aunt. This is the end

be?tween us. But mark what I say: we'll be mar?ried by Year's End. Our first?born is

al?ready con?ceived."

"Thee'll be mar?ried to?mor?row night if thee goes nigh him' Joined in smoke,

wed?ded in fire, bed?ded in the ash?es! Bed?ded in the ash?es, do ye hear me?"

The mad?wom?an ad?vanced on her, rail?ing, but Su?san had no more time to lis?ten.

The day was fleet?ing. There would be time to do the things that need?ed do?ing, but

on?ly if she moved at speed.

"Good?bye," she said again, and then gal?loped away. Her aunt's last words

fol?lowed her: In the ash?es, do ye hear me?

3

On her way out of town along the Great Road, Su?san saw rid?ers com?ing to?ward

her, and got off the high?way. This would not, she felt, be a good time to meet

pil?grims. There was an old gra?nary near?by; she rode Py?lon be?hind it, stroked his

neck, mur?mured for him to be qui?et.

It took the rid?ers longer to reach her po?si?tion than she would have ex?pect?ed, and

when they fi?nal?ly got there, she saw why. Rhea was with them, sit?ting in a black

cart cov?ered with mag?ical sym?bols. The witch had been scary when Su?san had

seen her on the night of the Kiss?ing Moon, but still rec?og?niz?ably hu?man; what the

girl saw pass?ing be?fore her now, rock?ing from side to side in the black cart and

clutch?ing a bag in her lap, was an un?sexed, sore-?rad?dled crea?ture that looked more

like a troll than a hu?man be?ing. With her were the Big Cof?fin Hunters.

“To Seafront!” the thing in the cart screamed. “Hie you on, and at full speed! I’ll

sleep in Thorin’s bed tonight or know the rea?son why! Sleep in it and piss in it, if I

take a no?tion! Hie you on, I say!”

De?pape—it was to his horse that the cart had been har?nessed —turned around and

looked at her with dis?taste and fear. “Still your mouth.”

Her an?swer was a fresh burst of laugh?ter. She rocked from side to side, hold?ing a

bag on her lap with one hand and point?ing at De?pape with the twist?ed, long-?nailed

in?dex fin?ger of the oth?er. Look?ing at her made Su?sane feel weak with ter?ror, and

she felt the pan?ic around her again, like some dark flu?id that would hap?pi?ly drown

her brain if giv?en half a chance.

She worked against the feel?ing as best she could, hold?ing on? to her mind, re?fus?ing

to let it turn in?to what it had been be?fore and would be again if she let it—a

brain?less bird trapped in a barn, bash?ing in?to the walls and ig?nor?ing the open

win?dow through which it had en?tered.

Even when the cart was gone be?low the next hill and there was noth ing left of

them but dust hang?ing in the air, she could hear Rhea’s wild cack?ling.

4

She reached the hut in the Bad Grass at one o’ the clock. For a mo?ment she just sat

astride Py?lon, look?ing at it. Had she and Roland been here hard?ly twen?ty-?four

hours ago? Mak?ing love and mak?ing plans? It was hard to be? lieve, but when she

dis?mount?ed and went in, the wick?er bas?ket in which she had brought them a cold

meal con?firmed it. It still sat up?on the rick?ety ta?ble.

Look?ing at the ham?per, she re?al?ized she hadn’t eat?en since

the pre?vi?ous

evening—a mis?er?able sup?per with Hart Thorin that she'd on?ly picked at, too aware

of his eyes on her body. Well, they'd done their last crawl, hadn't they? And she'd

nev?er have to walk down an?oth?er Seafront hall way won?der?ing what door he was

go?ing to come burst?ing out of like Jack out of his box, all grab?bing hands and stiff,

randy prick.

Ash?es, she thought. Ash?es and ash?es. But not us, Roland. I swear, my dar?ling, not

us.

She was fright?ened and tense, try?ing to put ev?ery?thing she now must do in

or?der—a pro?cess to be fol?lowed just as there was a pro?cess to be fol?lowed when

sad?dling a horse—but she was al?so six?teen and healthy. One look at the ham?per

and she was ravenous.

She opened it, saw there were ants on the two re?main?ing cold beef sand?wich?es,

brushed them off, and gob?bled the sand?wich?es down. The bread had got?ten rather

stiff, but she hard?ly no?ticed. There was a half jar of sweet cider and part of a cake,

as well.

When she had fin?ished ev?ery?thing, she went to the north com?er of the hut and

moved the hides some?one had be?gun to cure and then lost in?ter?est in. There was a

hol?low be?neath. With?in it, wrapped in soft leather, were Roland's guns.

If things go bad?ly, thee must come here and take them west to Gilead. Find my

fa?ther.

With faint but gen?uine cu?rios?ity, Su?san won?dered if Roland had re?al?ly ex?pect?ed

she would ride blithe?ly off to Gilead with his un?born child in her bel?ly while he

and his friends were roast?ed, scream?ing and red-?hand?ed, on the Reap-?Night

bon?fire.

She pulled one of the guns out of its hol?ster. It took her a mo?ment or two to sec

how to get the re?volver open, hut then the cylin?der rolled out and she saw that

each cham?ber was load?ed. She snapped it back in?to place and checked the oth?er

one.

She con?cealed them in the blan?ket-?roll be?hind her sad?dle, just as Roland had, then

mount?ed up and head?ed east again. But not to?ward town. Not yet. She had one

more stop to make first.

5

At around two o' the clock, word that Fran Lengyll would be speak?ing at the Town

Gath?er?ing Hall be?gan to sweep through the town of Mejis. No one could have said

where this news (it was too firm and spe?cif?ic to be a ru?mor) be?gan, and no one

much cared; they sim?ply passed it on.

By three o' the clock, the Gath?er?ing Hall was full, and two hun?dred or more stood

out?side, lis?ten?ing as Lengyll's brief ad?dress was re?layed back to them in whis?pers.

Coral Thorin, who had be?gun pass?ing the news of Lengyll's im?pend?ing ap?pear?ance

at the Trav?ellers' Rest, was not there. She knew what Lengyll was go?ing to say;

had, in fact, sup?port?ed Jonas's ar?gu?ment that it should be as sim?ple and di?rect as

pos?si?ble. There was no need for rab?ble-?rous?ing; the towns?folk would be a mob by

sun?down of

Reap?ing Day, a mob al?ways picked its own lead?ers, and it al?ways picked the right

ones.

Lengyll spoke with his hat held in one hand and a sil?ver reap?charm hang?ing from

the front of his vest. He was brief, he was rough, and he was con?vinc?ing. Most

folks in the crowd had known him all their lives, and didn't doubt a word he said.

Hart Thorin and Kim?ba Rimer had been mur?dered by Dear?born, Heath, and

Stock?worth, Lengyll told the crowd of men in den?im and wom?en in fad?ed

ging?ham. The crime had come home to them be?cause of a cer?

tain item—a bird's

skull—left in May?or Thorin's lap.

Mur?murs greet?ed this. Many of Lengyll's lis?ten?ers had seen the skull, ei?ther

mount?ed on the horn of Cuth?bert's sad?dle or worn jaun?ti?ly around his neck. They

had laughed at his prank?ish?ness. Now they thought of how he had laughed back at

them, and re?al?ized he must have been laugh?ing at a dif?fer?ent joke all along. Their

faces dark?ened.

The weapon used to slit the Chan?cel?lor's throat, Lengyll con?tin?ued, had be?longed

to Dear?born. The three young men had been tak?en that morn?ing as they pre?pared

to flee Mejis. Their mo?ti?va?tions were not en tire?ly clear, but they were like?ly af?ter

hors?es. If so, they would be for John Far?son, who was known to pay well for good

nags, and in cash. They were, in oth?er words, traitors to their own lands and to the

cause of the Af?fil?ia?tion.

Lengyll had plant?ed Bri?an Hock?ey's son Ru?fus three rows back. Now, ex?act?ly on

time, Ru?fus Hookey shout?ed out: "Has they con?fessed?"

"Aye," Lengyll said. "Con?fessed both mur?ders, and spoke it most proud, so they did."

A loud?er mur?mur at this, al?most a rum?ble. It ran back?ward like a wave to the

out?side, where it went from mouth to mouth: most proud, most proud, they had

mur?dered in the dark of night and spoke it most proud.

Mouths were tucked down. Fists clenched.

"Dear?born said that Jonas and his friends had caught on to what they were do?ing,

and took the word to Rimer. They killed Chan?cel?lor Rimer to shut him up while

they fin?ished their chores, and Thorin in case Rimer had passed word on."

This made lit?tle sense, Lati?go had ar?gued. Jonas had smiled and nod ded. No, he

had said, not a mite of sense, but it doesn't mat?ter.

Lengyll was pre?pared to an?swer ques?tions, but none were asked. There was on?ly

the mur?mur, the dark looks, the mut?ed click and clink of
reap?charms as peo?ple
shift?ed on their feet.

The boys were in jail. Lengyll made no state?ment con?cern?ing
what would hap?pen

to them next, and once again he was not asked. He said that
some of the ac?tiv?ities

sched?uled for the next day—the games, the rides, the turkey-
run, the pump?kin-

carv?ing con?test, the pig-?scram?ble, the rid dling com?pe?ti?
tion, and the dance—had

been can?celled out of re?spect for the tragedy. The things that
re?al?ly mat?tered

would go on, of course, as they al?ways had and must: the cat?
tle and live?stock

judg?ing, the horse-?pull, the sheep-?shear?ing, the stock?line
meet?ings, and the

auc?tions: horse, pig, cow, sheep. And the bon?fire at moon?
rise. The bon?fire and the

burn?ing of the guys. Chary?ou tree was the end of Reap?ing
Fair-?Day, and had been

since time out of mind. Noth?ing would stop it save the end of
the world.

“The bon?fire will bum and the stuffy-?guys will bum on it,” El?
dred Jonas had told

Lengyll. “That’s all you’re to say. It’s all you need to say.”

And he’d been right, Lengyll saw. It was on ev?ery face. Not just
the de?ter?mi?na?tion

to do right, but a kind of dirty ea?ger?ness. There were old
ways, old rites of which

the red-?hand?ed stuffy-?guys were one sur?viv?ing rem?nant.
There were los

cer?emo?ni?osos: Chary?ou tree. It had been gen?era tions since
they had been

prac?ticed (ex?cept, ev?ery once and again, in se cret places out
in the hills), but

some?times when the world moved on, it came back to where it
had been.

Keep it brief, Jonas had said, and it had been fine ad?vice, fine
ad?vice in?deed. He

wasn’t a man Lengyll would have want?ed around in more
peace?ful times, but a

use?ful one in times such as these.

“Gods give you peace,” he said now, step?ping back and fold?
ing his arms with his

hands on his shoulders to show he had finished. "Gods give us all peace."

"Long days and peaceful nights," they returned in a low, automatichorus. And

then they simply turned and left, to go wherever folks went on the afternoon

before Reaping. For a good many of them, Lengyll knew, it would be the

Travellers' Rest or the Bayview Hotel. He raised a hand and mopped his brow. He

hated to be out in front of people, and never so much as today, but he thought it

had gone well. Very well, indeed.

6

The crowd streamed away without speaking. Most, as Lengyll had foreseen,

headed for the saloons. Their way took them past the jail, but few looked at it...

and those few who did, did so in tiny, furtive glances. The porch was empty (save

for a plump red-handed stuffy sprawled in Sheriff Avery's rocker), and the door

stood ajar, as it usually did on warm and sunny afternoons. The boys were inside,

no doubt about that, but there was no sign that they were being guarded with any

particular zeal.

If the men passing on their way downhill to the Rest and the Bayview had banded

together into one group, they could have taken Roland and his friends with no

trouble whatsoever. Instead, they went by with their heads down, walking stolidly

and with no conversation to where the drinks were waiting. Today was not the

day. Nor tonight.

To-morrow, however—

7

Not too far from the Bar K, Susan saw something on the Barony's long slope of

grazing-land that made her rein up and simply sit in the saddle with her mouth

open. Below her and much farther east of her position, at least three miles away, a

band of a dozen cowboys had rounded up the biggest herd of

Drop-runners she

had ever seen: perhaps four hundred head in all. They ran lazily, going where the

vaqs pointed them with no trouble.

Probably think they're going in for the winter, Susan thought. But they weren't

headed in toward the ranches running along the crest of the Drop; the herd, so

large it flowed on the grass like a cloud-shadow, was headed west, toward

Hang-ing Rock.

Susan had believed everything Roland said, but this made it true in a personal

way, one she could relate directly to her dead father. Horses, of courses.

"You bastards," she murmured. "You horse-thieving bastards." She turned Python

and rode for the burned-out ranch. To her right, her shadow was growing long.

Overhead, the Demon Moon glimmered ghostly in the daylight sky.

8

She had worried that Jonas might have left men at the Bar K—although why he

would've she didn't really know, and the fear turned out to be groundless in any

case. The ranch was as empty as it had been for the five or six years between the

fire that had put paid to it and the arrival of the boys from In-World. She could see

signs of that morning's confrontation, however, and when she went into the

bunkhouse where the three of them had slept, she at once saw the gaping hole in

the floorboards. Jonas had neglected to close it up again after taking Alain's and

Cuthbert's guns.

She went down the aisle between the bunks, dropped to one knee, and looked into

the hole. Nothing. Yet she doubted if what she had come for had been there in the

first place—the hole wasn't big enough.

She paused, looking at the three cots. Which was Roland's? She supposed she

could find out—her nose would tell her, she knew the smell of

his hair and skin

very well—but she thought she would do bet?ter to put such soft im?puls?es be?hind

her. What she need?ed now was to be hard and quick—to move with?out paus?ing or

look?ing back.

Ash?es, Aunt Cord whis?pered in her head, al?most too faint?ly to hear. Su?san shook

her head im?pa?tient?ly, as if to clear that voice away, and walked out back.

There was noth?ing be?hind the bunkhouse, noth?ing be?hind the privy or to ei?ther

side of it. She went around to the back of the old cook-?shack next, and there she

found what she'd come look?ing for, placed ca?sual?ly and with no at?tempt at

con?ceal?ment: the two small bar?rels she had last seen slung over Capri?choso's back.

The thought of the mule sum?moned the thought of Sheemie, look?ing down at her

from his man's height and with his hope?ful boy's face. I'd like to take a fin de ano

kiss from ye, so I would.

Sheemie, whose life had been saved by "Mr. Arthur Heath." Sheemie, who had

risked the wrath of the witch by giv?ing Cuth?bert the note meant for her aunt.

Sheemie, who had brought these bar?rels up here. They had been smeared with soot

to par?tial?ly cam?ou?flage them, and Su?san got some on her hands and the sleeves of

her shirt as she took off the tops— more ash?es. But the fire?crack?ers were still

in?side: the round, fist-?sized big-?bangers and the small?er la?dyfin?gers.

She took plen?ty of both, stuff?ing her pock?ets un?til they bulged and car?ry?ing more

in her arms. She stowed them in her sad?dle?bags, then looked up at the sky. Three-

thir?ty. She want?ed to get back to Ham?bry no ear?li?er than twi?light, and that meant

at least an hour to wait. There was a lit?tle time to be soft, af?ter all.

Su?san went back in?to the bunkhouse and found the bed which had been Roland's

easy enough. She knelt beside it like a child saying bedtime prayers, put her face

against his pillow, and inhaled deeply.

“Roland,” she said, her voice muffled. “How I love thee. How I love thee, dear.”

She lay on his bed and looked toward the window, watching the light drain away.

Once she raised her hands in front of her eyes, examining the bare soles on her

feet. She thought of going to the pump in front of the kitchen and washing,

but decided not to. Let it stay. They were kind, one from many—strong in

purpose and strong in love.

Let the ashes stay, and do their worst.

9

My Susie has her faults, but she’s always on time. Pat Delgado used to say. Fearful

punctual, that girl.

It was true on the night before Reap. She skirted her own house and rode up to the

Travelers’ Rest not ten minutes after the sun had finally gone behind the hills,

filling the High Street with thick mauve shadows.

The street was eerily deserted, considering it was the night before Reap; the band

which had played in Green Heart every night for the last week was silent; there

were periodic rattles of firecrackers, but no yelling, laughing children; only a few

of the many colored lamps had been lit.

Stuffy guys seemed to peer from every shadow-thickened porch. Susan shivered at

the sight of their blank white-cross eyes.

Doings at the Rest were similarly odd. The hitchhiking rails were crowded (even

more horses had been tied at the rails of the mercantile across the street) and light

shone from every window—so many windows and so many lights that the inn

looked like a vast ship on a darkened sea—but there was none of the usual riot and

jubilation, all set to the jagtime tunes pouring out of Sheb’s piano.

She found she could imagine the customers inside all too

well— a hun?dred men,

maybe more—sim?ply stand?ing around and drink?ing. Not talk?ing, not laugh?ing, not

chuck?ing the dice down Sa?tan's Al?ley and cheer?ing or groan?ing at the re?sult. No

bot?toms stroked or pinched; no Reap-?kiss?es stolen; no ar?gu?ments start?ed out of

loose mouths and fin?ished with hard fists. Just men drink?ing, not three hun?dred

yards from where her love and his friends were locked up. The men who were here

wouldn't do any?thing tonight but drink, though. And if she was lucky . . . brave

and lucky...

As she drew Py?lon up in front of the sa?loon with a mur?mured word, a shape rose

out of the shad?ows. She tensed, and then the first or?angey light of the ris?ing moon

caught Sheemie's face. She re?laxed again—even laughed a lit?tle, most?ly at her?self.

He was a part of their ka-?tet; she knew he was. Was it sur?pris?ing that he should

know, as well?

"Su?san," he mur?mured, tak?ing off his som?brero and hold?ing it against his chest. "I

been wait?ing for'ee."

"Why?" she asked.

" 'Cause I knew ye'd come." He looked back over his shoul?der at the Rest, a black

bulk spray?ing crazy light to?ward ev?ery point of the com?pass. "We're go?ing to let

Arthur and them free, ain't we?"

"I hope so," she said.

"We have to. The folks in there, they don't talk, but they don't have to talk. I

knows, Su?san, daugh?ter of Pat. I knows."

She sup?posed he did. "Is Coral in?side?"

Sheemie shook his head. "Gone up to May?or's House. She told Stan ley she was

go?ing to help lay out the bod?ies for the fu?ner?al day af?ter to mor?row, but I don't

think she'll be here for the fu?ner?al. I think the Big Cof?fin Hunters is go?ing and

she'll go with 'em." He raised a hand and swiped at his leak?ing eyes. "Your mule,

Sheemie—"All sad?dled, and I got the long hal?ter." She looked at him, open-

mouthed. "How did ye know—" "Same way I knew ye'd be coming, Su?san-?sai. I

just knew." He shrugged, then point?ed vague?ly. "Capi's around the back. I tied him

to the cook's pump."

"That's good." She fumbled in the sad?dle?bag where she had put the small?er

fire?crack?ers. "Here. Take some of these. Do'ee have a sul?fur or two?"

"Aye." He asked no ques?tions, simply stuffed the fire?crack?ers in?to his front

pock?et. She, how?ev?er, who had nev?er been through the bat?wing doors of the

Trav?ellers' Rest in her whole life, had an?oth?er ques?tion for him.

"What do they do with their coats and hats and scrapes when they come in,

Sheemie? They must take em off; drink?ing's warm work."

"Oh, aye. They puts em on a long ta?ble just in?side the door. Some fights about

whose is whose when they're ready to go home."

She nod?ded, think?ing hard and fast. He stood be?fore her, still hold?ing his som?brero

against his chest, let?ting her do what he could not ... at least not in the

con?ven?tion?al?ly un?der?stood way. At last she raised her head again.

"Sheemie, if you help me, you're done in Ham?bry ... done in Mejis ... done in the

Out?er Arc. You go with us if we get away. You have to un?derstand that. Do you?"

She saw he did; his face fair?ly shone with the idea. "Aye, Su?san! Go with you and

Will Dear?born and Richard Stock?worth and my best friend, Mr. Arthur Heath! Go

to In-?World! We'll see build?ings and stat?ues and wom?en in gowns like fairy

princess?es and—"

"If we're caught, we'll be killed."

He stopped smil?ing, but his eyes didn't wa?ver. "Aye, killed we'll be if ta'en, most

like."

"Will you still help me?"

"Capi's all sad?dled," he re?peat?ed. Su?san reck?oned that was an?swer enough. She

took hold of the hand press?ing the som?brero to Sheemie's chest (the hat's crown

was pret?ty well crushed, and not for the first time). She bent, hold?ing Sheemie's

fin?gers with one hand and the horn of her sad?dle with the oth?er, and kissed his

cheek. He smiled up at her.

"We'll do our best, won't we?" she asked him.

"Aye, Su?san daugh?ter of Pat. We'll do our best for our friends. Our very best."

"Yes. Now lis?ten, Sheemie. Very care?ful?ly."

She be?gan to talk, and Sheemie lis?tened.

10

Twen?ty min?utes lat?er, as the bloat?ed or?ange moon strug?gled above the build?ings of

the town like a preg?nant wom?an climb?ing a steep hill, a lone va?que?ro led a mule

along Hill Street in the di?rec?tion of the Sher?iff's of fice. This end of Hill Street

was a pit of shad?ows. There was a lit?tle light around Green Heart, but even the

park (which would have been thronged, noisy, and bril?liant?ly lit in any oth?er year)

was most?ly emp?ty. Near?ly all the booths were closed, and of those few that

re?mained open, on?ly the for?tune?-teller was do?ing any busi?ness. Tonight all

for?tunes were bad, but still they came—don't they al?ways?

The va?que?ro was wear?ing a heavy ser?ape; if this par?tic?ular cow?boy had the breasts

of a wom?an, they were con?cealed. The vaq wore a large, sweat?-stained som?brero;

if this cow?boy had the face of a wom?an, it was like?wise con?cealed. Low, from

be?neath that hat's broad brim, came a voice singing "Care?less Love."

The mule's small sad?dle was buried un?der the large bun?dle which had been roped

to it—cloth or clothes of some kind, it might have been, al though the deep?en?ing

shad?ows made it im?pos?si?ble to say for sure. Most amus?ing of all was what hung

around the mule's neck like some pe?cu?liar reap?-charm: two

som?breros and a

drover's hat strung on a length of rope.

As the vaq neared the Sher?iff's of?fice, the singing ceased. The place might have

been de?sert?ed if not for the sin?gle dim light shin?ing through one win?dow. In the

porch rock?er was a com?ical stuffy-?guy wear?ing one of Herk Av?ery's em?broi?dered

vests and a tin star. There were no guards; ab so?lute?ly no sign that the three most

hat?ed men in Mejis were se?questered with?in. And now, very faint?ly, the va?que?ro

could hear the strum of a gui?tar.

It was blot?ted out by a thin rat?tle of fire?crack?ers. The vaq looked over one shoul?der

and saw a dim fig?ure. It waved. The va?que?ro nod?ded, waved back, then tied the

mule to the hitch?ing-?post—the same one where Roland and his friends had tied

their hors?es when they had come to in?tro?duce them?selves to the Sher?iff, on a

sum?mer day so long ago.

11

The door opened—no one had both?ered to lock it—while Dave Hol?lis was try?ing,

for about the two hun?dredth time, to play the bridge of “Cap tain Mills, You

Bas?tard.” Across from him, Sher?iff Av?ery sat rocked back in his desk chair with

his hands laced to?geth?er on his paunch. The room flick?ered with mild or?ange

lamp?light.

“You keep it up, Deputy Dave, and there won't have to be any ex?ecu tion,”

Cuth?bert All?go?od said. He was stand?ing at the door of one of the cells with his

hands wrapped around the bars. “We'll kill our?selves. In self-?de?fense.”

“Shut up, mag?got,” Sher?iff Av?ery said. He was half-?doz?ing in the wake of a four-

chop din?ner, think?ing of how he would tell his broth?er (and his broth?er's wife, who

was killing pret?ty) in the next Barony about this hero?ic day. He would be mod?est,

but he would still get it across to them that he'd played a cen?

tral role; that if not for

him, these three young ladrones might have—

“Just don’t sing,” Cuthbert said to Dave. “I’ll confess to the murder of Arthur Eld

himself if you just don’t sing.”

To Bert’s left, Alain was sitting cross-legged on his bunk. Roland was lying on his

with his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. But at the moment the

door’s latch clicked, he swung to a sitting position. As if he’d only been waiting.

“That’ll be Bridger,” Deputy Dave said, gladly putting his guitar aside. He hated

this duty and couldn’t wait to be relieved. Heath’s jokes were the worst. That he

could continue to joke in the face of what was going to happen to them tomorrow.

“I think it’s likely one of them,” Sheriff Avery said, meaning the Big Coffin

Hunters.

In fact, it was neither. It was a cowboy all but buried in a serape that looked much

too big for him (the ends actually dragged on the boards as he clumped in and shut

the door behind him), and wearing a hat that came way down over his eyes. To

Herk Avery, the fellow looked like some body’s idea of a cowboy stuffy.

“Say, stranger!” he said, beginning to smile ... for this was surely someone’s joke,

and Herk Avery could take a joke as well as any man. Especially after four chops

and a mound of mashed. “Howdy! What business do ye—”

The hand which hadn’t closed the door had been under the scrape. When it came

out, it was clumsily holding a gun all three of the prisoners recognized at once.

Avery stared at it, his smile slowly fading. His hands unlaced themselves. His feet,

which had been propped up on his desk, came down to the floor.

“Whoa, partner,” he said slowly. “Let’s talk about it.”

“Get the keys off the wall and unlock the cells,” the vaq said in a hoarse,

artificially deep voice. Outside, unnoticed by all save Roland, more firecrackers

rat?tled in a dry, pop?ping string.

"I can't hard?ly do that," Av?ery said, eas?ing open the bot?tom draw?er of his desk

with his foot. There were sev?er?al guns, left over from that morn?ing, in?side. "Now,

I don't know if that thing's load?ed, but I don't hard?ly think a trail?dog like you—"

The new?com?er point?ed the gun at the desk and pulled the trig?ger. The re?port was

deaf?en?ing in the lit?tle room, but Roland thought—hoped—that with the door shut,

it would sound like just an?oth?er fire?crack?er. Big?ger than some, small?er than oth?ers.

Good girl, he thought. Oh, good girl—but be care?ful. For gods' sake, Sue, be care?ful.

All three of them stand?ing in a line at the cell doors now, eyes wide and mouths tight.

The bul?let struck the com?er of the Sher?iff's roll?top and tore off a huge splin?ter.

Av?ery screamed, tilt?ed back in his chair again, and went sprawl ing. His foot

re?mained hooked un?der the draw?er-?pull; the draw?er shot out and over?turned,

spilling three an?cient firearms across the board floor.

"Su?san, look out!" Cuth?bert shout?ed, and then: "No, Dave!"

At the end of his life, it was du?ty and not fear of the Big Cof?fin Hunters which

pro?pelled Dave Hol?lis, who had hoped to be Sher?iff of Mejis him?self when Av?ery

re?tired (and, he some?times told his wife, Judy, a bet?ter one than Fat?so had ev?er

dreamed of be?ing). He for?got that he had se?ri?ous ques?tions about the way the boys

had been tak?en as well as about what they might or might not have done. All he

thought of then was that they were pris?on?ers o' the Barony, and such would not be

tak?en if he could help it.

He lunged for the cow?boy in the too-?big clothes, mean?ing to tear the gun out of his

hands. And shoot him with it, if nec?es?sary.

12

Su?san was star?ing at the yel?low blaze of fresh wood on the

com?er of the Sher?iff's

desk, for?get?ing ev?ery?thing in her amaze?ment—so much
dam age in?flict?ed by the

sin?gle twitch of a fin?ger!—when Cuth?bert's des?per?ate shout
awak?ened her to her

po?si?tion.

She shrank back against the wall, avoid?ing Dave's first swipe at
the over?sized

ser?ape, and, with?out think?ing, pulled the trig?ger again.
There was an?oth?er loud

ex?plo?sion, and Dave Hol?lis—a young man on?ly two years
old?er than she

her?self—was flung back?ward with a smok?ing hole in his shirt
be?tween two points

of the star he wore. His eyes were wide and un?be?liev?ing. His
mon?ocle lay by one

out?stretched hand on its length of black silk rib?bon. One of his
feet struck his

gui?tar and knocked it to the floor with a thrum near?ly as mu?
si?cal as the chords he

had been try?ing to make.

“Dave,” she whis?pered. “Oh Dave, I'm sor?ry, what did I do?”

Dave tried once to get up, then col?lapsed for?ward on his face.
The hole go?ing in?to

the front of him was small, but the one she was look?ing at now,
the one com?ing

out the back, was huge and hideous, all black and red and
charred edges of cloth ...

as if she had run him through with a blaz?ing hot pok?er in?
stead of shoot?ing him

with a gun, which was sup posed to be mer?ci?ful and civ?ilized
and was clear?ly

nei?ther one.

“Dave,” she whis?pered. “Dave, I...”

“Su?san look out!” Roland shout?ed.

It was Av?ery. He scut?tled for?ward on his hands and knees,
seized her around the

calves, and yanked her feet out from un?der her. She came down
on her bot?tom

with a tooth-?rat?tling crash and was face to face with him—his
frog-?eyed, large-

pored face, his gar?lic-?smelling hole of a mouth.

“Gods, ye're a girl,” he whis?pered, and reached for her. She
pulled the trig?ger of

Roland's gun again, set?ting the front of her ser?ape on fire and

blow?ing a hole in

the ceil?ing. Plas?ter dust drift?ed down. Av?ery's ham sized hands set?tled around her

throat, cut?ting off her wind. Some?where far away, Roland shrieked her name.

She had one more chance.

Maybe.

One's enough, Sue, her fa?ther spoke in?side of her head. One's all ye need, my dear.

She cocked Roland's pis?tol with the side of her thumb, socked the muz?zle deep

in?to the flab hang?ing from the un?der?side of Sher?iff Herk Av?ery's head, and pulled

the trig?ger.

The mess was con?sid?er?able.

13

Av?ery's head dropped in?to her lap, as heavy and wet as a raw roast. Above it, she

could feel grow?ing heat. At the bot?tom edge of her vi?sion was the yel?low flick?er of

fire.

"On the desk!" Roland shout?ed, yank?ing the door of his cell so hard it rat?tled in its

frame. "Su?san, the wa?ter-?pitch?er! For your fa?ther's sake!"

She rolled Av?ery's head out of her lap, got to her feet, and staggered to the desk

with the front of the ser?ape burn?ing. She could smell its charred stench and was

grate?ful in some far com?er of her mind that she'd had time, while wait?ing for dusk,

to tie her hair be?hind her.

The pitch?er was al?most full, but not with wa?ter; she could smell the sweet-?sour

tang of graf. She doused her?self with it, and there was a brisk hiss?ing as the liq?uid

hit the flames. She stripped the ser?ape off (the over sized sombrero came with it)

and threw it on the floor. She looked at Dave again, a boy she had grown up with,

one she might even have kissed be?hind the door of Hock?ey's, once up?on an an?tique

time.

"Su?san!" It was Roland's voice, harsh and ur?gent. "The keys! Hur?ry!"

Su?san grabbed the keyring from the nail on the wall. She went

to Roland's cell

first and thrust the ring blindly through the bars. The air was thick with smells of

gun-smoke, burned wool, blood. Her stomach clenched helplessly at every breath.

Roland picked the right key, reached back through the bars with it, and plunged it

into the lockbox. A moment later he was out, and hugging her roughly as her tears

broke. A moment after that, Cuthbert and Alain were out, as well.

"You're an angel!" Alain said, hugging her himself.

"Not I," she said, and began to cry harder. She thrust the gun at Roland. It felt

filthy in her hand; she never wanted to touch one again. "Him and me played

together when we were berries. He was one of the good ones—never a braid-puller

or a bully—and he grew up a good one. Now I've ended him, and who'll tell his

wife?"

Roland took her back into his arms and held her there for a moment. "You did

what you had to. If not him, then us. Does thee not know it?"

She nodded against his chest. "Every, him I don't mind so much, but Dave . . ."

"Come on," Roland said. "Someone might recognize the gunshots for what they

were. Was it Sheemie throwing firecrackers?"

She nodded. "I've got clothes for you. Hats and scrapes."

Susan hurried back to the door, opened it, peeked out in either direction, then

slipped into the growing dark.

Cuthbert took the charred sapper and put it over Deputy Dave's face. "Tough luck,

partner," he said. "You got caught in between, didn't you? I reckon you wasn't so

bad."

Susan came back in, burdened with the stolen gear which had been tied to Capi's

saddle. Sheemie was already off on his next errand without having to be told. If

the inn-boy was a halfwit, she'd known a lot of folks in her time who were running

on quarters and eighths.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" Alain asked.

"The Trav'ellers' Rest. And I didn't. Sheemie did." She held the hats out. "Come on, hur'ry."

Cuthbert took the headgear and passed it out. Roland and Alain had already

slipped in to the scrapes; with the hats added and pulled well down over their

faces, they could have been any Drop-vags in Barony.

"Where are we go'ing?" Alain asked as they stepped out on to the porch. The street

was still dark and deserted at this end; the gunshots had attracted no attention.

"Hockey's, to start with," Susan said. "That's where your horses are."

They went down the street together in a little group of four. Capi was gone;

Sheemie had taken the mule along. Susan's heart was thudding rapidly and she

could feel sweat standing out on her brow, but she still felt cold. Whether or no

what she had done was murder, she had ended two lives this evening, and crossed

a line that could never be recrossed in the other direction. She had done it for

Roland, for her love, and simply knowing she could have done no different now

offered some consolation.

Be happy together, ye faithless, ye cozeners, ye murderers. I curse thee with the ashes.

Susan seized Roland's hand, and when he squeezed, she squeezed back. And as

she looked up at Demon Moon, its wicked face now draining from choleric red-

orange to silver, she thought that when she had pulled the trigger on poor, earnest

Dave Hollis, she had paid for her love with the dearest currency of all—had paid

with her soul. If he left her now, her aunt's curse would be fulfilled, for only ashes

would remain.

CHAPTER IX

REAPING

As they stepped in?to the sta?ble, which was lit by one dim gas lamp, a shad?ow

moved out of one of the stalls. Roland, who had belt?ed on both guns, now drew

them. Sheemie looked at him with an un?cer?tain smile, hold?ing a stir?rup in one

hand. Then the smile broad?ened, his eyes flashed with hap?pi?ness, and he ran

to?ward them.

Roland bol?stered his guns and made ready to em?brace the boy, but Sheemie ran

past him and threw him?self in?to Cuth?bert's arms.

"Whoa, whoa," Cuth?bert said, first stag?ger?ing back com?ical?ly and then lift?ing

Sheemie off his feet. "You like to knock me over, boy!"

"She got ye out!" Sheemie cried. "Knew she would, so I did! Good old Su?san!"

Sheemie looked around at Su?san, who stood be?side Roland. She was still pale, but

now seemed com?posed. Sheemie turned back to Cuth?bert and plant?ed a kiss

di?rect?ly in the cen?ter of Bert's fore?head.

"Whoa!" Bert said again. "What's that for?"

" 'Cause I love you, good old Arthur Heath! You saved my life!"

"Well, maybe I did," Cuth?bert said, laugh?ing in an em?bar?rassed way (his bor?rowed

som?brero, too large to be?gin with, now sat com?ical?ly askew on his head), "but if

we don't get a move on, I won't have saved it for long."

"Hors?es are all sad?dled," Sheemie said. "Su?san told me to do it and I did. I did it

just right. I just have to put this stir?rup on Mr. Richard Stock?worth's horse,

be?cause the one on there's 'bout worn through."

"That's a job for lat?er," Alain said, tak?ing the stir?rup. He put it aside, then turned to

Roland. "Where do we go?"

Roland's first thought was that they should re?turn to the Thorin mau?soleum.

Sheemie re?act?ed with in?stant hor?ror. "The bone?yard? And with De mon Moon at

the full?" He shook his head so vi?olent?ly that his som?brero came off and his hair

flew from side to side. "They're dead in there, sai Dear?born, but if ye tease em

dur?ing the time of the De?mon, they's apt to get up and walk!"

"It's no good, any?way," Su?san said. "The wom?en of the town'll be lin?ing the way

from Seafront with flow?ers, and fill?ing the mau?soleum, too. Olive will be in

charge, if she's able, but my aunt and Coral are apt to be in the com?pa?ny. Those

aren't ladies we want to meet."

"All right," Roland said. "Let's mount up and ride. Think about it, Su?san. You too,

Sheemie. We want a place where we can hide up un?til dawn, at least, and it should

be a place we can get to in less than an hour. Off the Great Road, and in any

di?rec?tion from Ham?bry but north?west."

"Why not north?west?" Alain asked.

"Be?cause that's where we're go?ing now. We've got a job to do ... and we're go?ing

to let them know we're do?ing it. El?dred Jonas most of all." He of?fered a thin blade

of smile. "I want him to know the game is over. No more Cas?tles. The re?al

gun?slingers are here. Let's see if he can deal with them."

2

An hour lat?er, with the moon well above the trees, Roland's ka?tet ar?rived at the

Cit?go oil?patch. They rode out par?al?lel to the Great Road for safe?ty's sake, but, as it

hap?pened, the cau?tion was wast?ed: they saw not one rid?er on the road, go?ing in

ei?ther di?rec?tion. It's as if Reap?ing's been can?celled this year, Su?san thought . . .

then she thought of the red-?hand?ed stuffies, and shiv?ered. They would have

paint?ed Roland's hands red to?mor?row night, and still would, if they were caught.

Not just him, ei?ther. All of us.

Sheemie, too.

They left the hors?es (and Capri?choso, who had trot?ted ill-?tem?pered?ly but nim?bly

be?hind them on a teth?er) tied to some long-?dead pump?ing equip?ment in the

south?east?ern com?er of the patch, and then walked slow?ly to?ward the work?ing

der?ricks, which were clus?tered in the same area. They spoke

in whis?pers when

they spoke at all. Roland doubt?ed if that was nec es?sary, but whis?pers here seemed

nat?ural enough. To Roland, Cit?go was far spook?ier than the grave?yard, and while

he doubt?ed that the dead in that lat?ter place awoke even when Old De?mon was

full, there were some very un?qui?et corpses here, squalling zom?bies that stood rusty-

weird in the moon?light with their pis?tons go?ing up and down like march?ing feet.

Roland led them in?to the ac?tive part of the patch, nev?er?the?less, past a sign which

read how's your hard?hat? and an?oth?er read?ing we pro?duce oil, we re?fine safe?ty.

They stopped at the foot of a der?rick grind?ing so loud?ly that Roland had to shout

in or?der to be heard.

"Sheemie! Give me a cou?ple of those big-?bangers!"

Sheemie had tak?en a pock?et?ful from Su?san's sad?dle?bag and now hand?ed a pair of

them over. Roland took Bert by the arm and pulled him for?ward. There was a

square of rusty fenc?ing around the der?rick, and when the boys tried to climb it, the

hor?izon?tals snapped like old bones. They looked at each oth?er in the run?ning

shad?ows com?bined of ma?chin?ery and moon?light, ner?vous and amused.

Su?san twitched Roland's arm. "Be care?ful!" she shout?ed over the rhy?mic

whumpa-?whumpa-?whumpa of the der?rick ma?chin?ery. She didn't look fright?ened,

he saw, on?ly ex?cit?ed and alert.

He grinned, pulled her for?ward, and kissed the lobe of her ear. "Be ready to run,"

he whis?pered. "If we do this right, there's go?ing to be a new can?dle here at Cit?go.

A hel?la?cious big one."

He and Cuth?bert ducked un?der the low?est strut of the rusty der?rick tow?er and stood

next to the equip?ment, winc?ing at the ca?copho?ny. Roland won?dered that it hadn't

torn it?self apart years ago. Most of the works were housed in rusty met?al blocks,

but he could see a gi?gan?tic turn?ing shaft of some kind, gleam?ing with oil that must

be sup?plied by au?to?mat?ed jets. Up this close, there was a gassy smell that

re?mind?ed him of the jet that flared rhyth?mi?cal?ly on the oth?er side of the oil?patch.

“Gi?ant-?farts!” Cuth?bert shout?ed.

“What?”

“I said it smells like . . . aw, nev?er mind! Let’s do it if-?we can ... can we? ”

Roland didn’t know. He walked to?ward the ma?chin?ery cry?ing out be neath met?al

cowls which were paint?ed a fad?ed, rust?ing green. Bert fol?lowed with some

re?luc?tance. The two of them slid in?to a short aisle, smelly and bak?ing hot, that took

them al?most di?rect?ly be?neath the der?rick. Ahead of them, the shaft at the end of the

pis?ton turned steady?ly, shed?ding oily teardrops down its smooth sides. Be?side it

was a curved pipe— al?most sure?ly an over?flow pipe, Roland thought. An

oc?ca?sion?al drop of crude oil fell from its lip, and there was a black pud?dle on the

ground be?neath. He point?ed at it, and Cuth?bert nod?ded.

Shout?ing would do no good in here; the world was a roar?ing, squeal ing din.

Roland curled one hand around his friend’s neck and pulled Cuth bert’s ear to his

lips; he held a big-?bang up in front of Bert’s eyes with the oth?er.

“Light it and run,” he said. “I’ll hold it, give you as much time as I can. That’s for

my ben?efit as much as for yours. I want a clear path back through that ma?chin?ery,

do you un?der?stand?”

Cuth?bert nod?ded against Roland’s lips, then turned the gun?slinger’s head so he

could speak in the same fash?ion. “What if there’s enough gas here to bum the air

when I make a spark?”

Roland stepped back. Raised his palms in a “How-?do-?I-?know?” ges ture. Cuth?bert

laughed and drew out a box of sul?fur match?es which he had scooped off Av?ery’s

desk be?fore leav?ing. He asked with his eye?brows if Roland was ready. Roland
nod?ded.

The wind was blow?ing hard, but un?der the der?rick the sur?round?ing ma?chin?ery cut

it off and the flame from the sul?fur rose straight. Roland held out the big-?banger,

and had a mo?men?tary, painful mem?ory of his moth?er: how she had hat?ed these

things, how she had al?ways been sure that he would lose an eye or a fin?ger to one.

Cuth?bert tapped his chest above his heart and kissed his palm in the uni?ver?sal

ges?ture of good luck. Then he touched the flame to the fuse. It be?gan to sput?ter.

Bert turned, pre?tend?ed to bang off a cov?ered block of ma?chin?ery—that was Bert,

Roland thought; he would joke on the gal?lows—and then dashed back down the

short cor?ri?dor they'd used to get here.

Roland held the round fire?work as long as he dared, then lobbed it in?to the

over?flow pipe. He winced as he turned away, half-?ex?pect?ing what Bert was afraid

of: that the very air would ex?plode. It didn't. He ran down the short aisle, came

in?to the clear, and saw Cuth?bert stand?ing just out?side the bro?ken bit of fenc?ing.

Roland flapped both hands at him—Go, you id?iot, go!—and then the world blew

up be?hind him.

The sound was a deep, belch?ing thud that seemed to shove his eardrums in?ward

and suck the breath out of his throat. The ground rolled un?der his feet like a wave

un?der a boat, and a large, warm hand plant?ed it self in the cen?ter of his back and

shoved him for?ward. He thought he ran with it for a step—maybe even two or

three steps—and then he was lift?ed off his feet and hurled at the fence, where

Cuth?bert was no longer stand ing; Cuth?bert was sprawled on his back, star?ing up

at some?thing be?hind Roland. The boy's eyes were wide and won?der?ing; his mouth

hung open. Roland could see all this very well, because Citgo was now as bright

as in full daylight. They had lit their own Reaping bonfire, it seemed, a night early

and much brighter than the one in town could ever hope to be.

He went skidding on his knees to where Cuthbert lay, and grabbed him under one

arm. From behind them came a vast, ripping roar, and now chunks of metal began

to fall around them. They got up and ran toward where Alain stood in front of

Susan and Sheemie, trying to protect them.

Roland took a quick look back over his shoulder and saw that the remains of the

derick—about half of it still stood—were glowing blackish red, like a heated

horse shoe, around a flaring yellow torch that ran perhaps a hundred and fifty feet

into the sky. It was a start. He didn't know how many other dericks they could fire

before folk began arriving from town, but he was determined to do as many as

possible, no matter what the risks might be. Blowing up the tankers at Hanging

Rock was only half the job. Farson's source had to be wiped out.

Further firecrackers dropped down further overflow pipes turned out not to be

necessary. There was a network of interconnecting pipes under the oil patch, most

filled with natural gas that had leaked in through ancient, decaying seals. Roland

and Cuthbert had no more than reached the others when there was a fresh

explosion, and a fresh tower of flame erupted from a derick to the right of the one

they had set afire. A moment later, a third derick—this one sixty full yards away

from the first two— exploded with a dragon's roar. The ironwork tore free of its

anchoring concrete pillars like a tooth pulled from a decayed gum. It rose on a

cushion of blazing blue and yellow, attained a height of perhaps seventy feet, then

heeled over and came crashing back down, spewing sparks in

ev?ery di?rec?tion.

An?oth?er. An?oth?er. And yet an?oth?er.

The five young peo?ple stood in their com?er, stunned, hold?ing their hands up to

shield their eyes from the glare. Now the oil?patch flared like a birth?day cake, and

the heat bak?ing to?ward them was enor?mous.

“Gods be kind,” Alain whis?pered.

If they lin?gered here much longer, Roland re?al?ized, they would be popped like

corn. There were the hors?es to con?sider, too; they were well away from the main

fo?cus of the ex?plo?sions, but there was no guaran tee that the fo?cus would stay

where it was; al?ready he saw two der?ricks that hadn’t even been work?ing en?gulfed

in flames. The hors?es would be ter?ri?fied.

Hell, he was ter?ri?fied.

“Come on!” he shout?ed.

They ran for the hors?es through shift?ing yel?low-?orange bril?liance.

3

At first Jonas thought it was go?ing on in his own head—that the ex?plo sions were

part of their love?mak?ing.

Love?mak?ing, yar. Love?mak?ing, horse?shit. He and Coral made love no more than

don?keys did sums. But it was some?thing. Oh yes in?deed it was.

He’d been with pas?sion?ate wom?en be?fore, ones who took you in?to a kind of oven-

place and then held you there, star?ing with greedy in?ten?si?ty as they pumped their

hips, but un?til Coral he’d nev?er been with a wom?an that sparked such a pow?er?ful?ly

har?mon?ic chord in him?self. With sex, he had al?ways been the kind of man who

took it when it came and for?got it when it didn’t. But with Coral he on?ly want?ed to

take it, take it, and take it some more. When they were to?geth?er they made love

like cats or fer?rets, twist?ing and hiss?ing and claw?ing; they bit at each oth?er and

cursed at each oth?er, and so far none of it was even close to enough. When he was

with her, Jonas sometimes felt as if he were being fried in sweet oil.

Tonight there had been a meeting with the Horsemen's Association, which had

pretty much become the Farson Association in these latter days. Jonas had brought

them up to date, had answered their idiotic questions, and had made sure they

understood what they'd be doing the next day. With that done, he had checked on

Rhea, who had been installed in Kimba Rimer's old suite. She hadn't even noticed

Jonas peering in at her. She sat in Rimer's high-ceilinged, book-lined

study—behind Rimer's ironwood desk, in Rimer's upholstered chair, looking as

out of place as a whore's bloomers on a church altar. On Rimer's desk was the

Wizard's Rainbow. She was passing her hands back and forth above it and

muttering rapidly under her breath, but the ball remained dark.

Jonas had locked her in and had gone to Coral. She had been waiting for him in

the parlor where tomorrow's Convention would have been held. There were

plenty of bedrooms in that wing, but it was to her dead brother's that she had led

him ... and not by accident, either, Jonas was sure. There they made love in the

canopied bed Hart Thorin would never share with his gilly.

It was fierce, as it had always been, and Jonas was approaching his orgasm when

the first oil derick blew. Christ, she's something, he thought. There's never in the

whole damned world been a woman like—

Then two more explosions, in rapid succession, and Coral froze for a moment

beneath him before beginning to thrust her hips again. "Cit go," she said in a

hoarse, panting voice.

"Yar," he growled, and began to thrust with her. He had lost all interest in making

love, but they had reached the point where it was impossible to stop, even under

threat of death or dis?mem?ber?ment.

Two min?utes lat?er he was strid?ing, naked, to?ward Thorin's lit?tle lick of a bal?cony,

his half-?erect pe?nis wag?ging from side to side ahead of him like some halfwit's

idea of a mag?ic wand. Coral was a step be?hind him, as naked as he was.

"Why now?" she burst out as Jonas thrust open the bal?cony door. "I could have

come three more times!"

Jonas ig?nored her. The coun?try?side look?ing north?west was a moon-?gild?ed dark?ness

. . . ex?cept where the oil?patch was. There he saw a fierce yel?low core of light. It

was spread?ing and bright?en?ing even as he watched; one thud?ding ex?plo?sion af?ter

an?oth?er ham?mered across the in?ter?ven?ing miles.

He felt a cu?ri?ous dark?en?ing in his mind—that feel?ing had been there ev?er since the

brat, Dear?born, by the some febrile leap of in?tu?ition, had rec?og?nized him for who

and what he was. Mak?ing love to the en?er?get?ic Coral melt?ed that feel?ing a lit?tle,

but now, look?ing at the burn?ing tan?gle of fire which had five min?utes ago been the

Good Man's oil re?serves, it came back with de?bil?itat?ing in?ten?si?ty, like a swamp-

fever that some?times quits the flesh but hides in the bones and nev?er re?al?ly leaves.

You 're in the west, Dear?born had said. The soul of a man such as you can nev?er

leave the west. Of course it was true, and he hadn't need?ed any such tit?mon?key as

Will Dear?born to tell him ... but now that it had been said, there was a part of his

mind that couldn't stop think?ing about it.

Fuck?ing Will Dear?born. Where, ex?act?ly, was he now, him and his pair of good-

man?nered mates? In Av?ery's cu?la?bo?zo? Jonas didn't think so. Not any?more.

Fresh ex?plo?sions ripped the night. Down be?low, men who had run and shout?ed in

the wake of the ear?ly morn?ing's as?sas?si?na?tions were running and shout?ing again.

"It's the biggest Reap?ing fire?work that ev?er was," Coral said

in a low voice.

Before Jonas could reply, there was a hard hammering on the bed room door. It

was thrown open a second later, and Clay Reynolds came clumping across the

room, wearing a pair of blue jeans and nothing else. His hair was wild; his eyes

were wilder.

"Bad news from town, Elfred," he said. "Dearborn and the other two In-World

brats"

Three more explosions, falling almost on top of each other. From the blazing

Citgo oilpatch a great red-orange fireball rose lazily into the black of night, faded,

disappeared. Reynolds walked out onto the balcony and stood between them at the

railing, unmindful of their nakedness. He stared at the fireball with wide,

wondering eyes until it was gone. As gone as the brats. Jonas felt that curious,

debilitating gloom trying to steal over him again.

"How did they get away?" he asked. "Do you know? Does Avery?"

"Avery's dead. The deputy who was with him, too. 'Twas another deputy found

em, Todd Bridger . . . Elfred, what's going on out there? What happened?"

"Oh, that's your boys," Coral said. "Didn't take em long to start their own Reaping

party, did it?"

How much heart do they have? Jonas asked himself. It was a good

question—maybe the only one that mattered. Were they now done making

trouble . . . or just getting started?

He once more wanted to be out of here—out of Seafront, out of Hamby, out of

Mejis. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be miles and wheels and

leagues away. He had bounded around his Hillock, it was too late to go back, and

now he felt horribly exposed.

"Clay."

"Yes, Elfred?"

But the man's eyes—and his mind—were still on the con?fla?gra?tion at Cit?go. Jonas

took his shoul?der and turned Reynolds to?ward him. Jonas felt his own mind

start?ing to pick up speed, tick?ing past points and de?tails, and wel?comed the

feel?ing. That queer, dark sense of fa?tal?ism fad?ed and dis?ap?peared.

“How many men are here?” he asked.

Reynolds frowned, thought about it. “Thir?ty-five.” he said. “Maybe.”

“How many armed?”

“With guns?”

“No, with pea-blow?ers, you damned fool.”

“Prob?ably . . .” Reynolds pulled his low?er lip, frown?ing more fierce?ly than ev?er.

“Prob?ably a dozen. That's guns like?ly to work, you ken.”

“The big boys from the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation? Still all here?”

“I think so.”

“Get Lengyll and Ren?frew. At least you won't have to wake em up; they'll all be

up, and most of em right down there.” Jonas jerked a thumb at the court?yard. “Tell

Ren?frew to put to?geth?er an ad?vance par?ty. Armed men. I'd like eight or ten, but I'll

take five. Have that old wom?an's cart har?nessed to the strongest, hardi?est pony this

place has got. Tell that old fuck Miguel that if the pony he choos?es dies in the

traces be?tween here and Hang?ing Rock, he'll be us?ing his wrin?kled old balls for

earplugs.”

Coral Thorin barked brief, harsh laugh?ter. Reynolds glanced at her, did a dou?ble-

take at her breasts, then looked back at Jonas with an ef?fort.

“Where's Roy?” Jonas asked.

Reynolds looked up. “Third floor. With some lit?tle serv?ing maid.”

“Kick him out,” Jonas said. “It's his job to get the old bitch ready to ride.”

“We're go?ing?”

“Soon as we can. You and me first, with Ren?frew's boys, and Lengyll be?hind, with

the rest of the men. You just make sure Hash Ren?frew's with

us, Clay; that man's

got sand in his craw."

"What about the hors'es out on the Drop?"

"Nev'er mind the ev'er?fuck?ing hors'es." There was an'oth'er ex?plo?sion at Cit?go;

an'oth'er fire?ball float?ed in?to the sky. Jonas couldn't see the dark clouds of smoke

which must be rush?ing up, or smell the oil; the wind, out of the east and in?to the

west, would be car?ry?ing both away from town.

"But—"

"Just do as I say." Jonas now saw his pri?or?ities in clear, as? cend?ing or der. The

hors'es were on the bot?tom—Far?son could find hors'es damned near any?where.

Above them were the tankers gath?ered at Hang?ing Rock. They were more

im?por?tant than ev'er now, be?cause the source was gone. Lose the tankers, and the

Big Cof?fin Hunters could for?get go?ing home.

Yet most im?por?tant of all was Par?son's lit?tle piece of the Wiz?ard's Rain?bow. It was

the one tru?ly ir?re?place?able item. If it was bro?ken, let it be bro?ken in the care of

George Lati?go, not that of El?dred Jonas.

"Get mov?ing," he told Reynolds. "De?pape rides af?ter, with Lengyll's men. You

with me. Go on. Make it hap?pen."

"And me?" Coral asked.

He reached out and tugged her to?ward him. "I ain't for?got you, dar?lin," he said.

Coral nod?ded and reached be?tween his legs, obliv?ious of the star?ing Clay

Reynolds. "Aye," she said. "And I ain't for?got you."

4

They es?caped Cit?go with ring?ing ears and slight?ly singed around the edges but not

re?al?ly hurt, Sheemie rid?ing dou?ble be?hind Cuth?bert and Capri?choso clat?ter?ing

af?ter, at the end of his long lead.

It was Su?sun who came up with the place they should go, and like most so?lu?tions,

it seemed com?plete?ly ob?vi?ous . . . once some?one had thought of it. And so, not

long af?ter Reap?ing Eve had be?come Reap?ing Mom, the five

of them came to the

hut in the Bad Grass where Su?san and Roland had on sev?er?al oc?ca?sions met to make love.

Cuth?bert and Alain un?rolled blan?kets, then sat on them to ex?am?ine the guns they

had lib?er?at?ed from the Sher?iff's of?fice. They had al?so found Bert's sling?shot.

"These're hard cal?ibers," Alain said, hold?ing one up with the cylin?der sprung and

peer?ing one-?eyed down the bar?rel. "If they don't throw too high or wide, Roland, I

think we can do some busi?ness with them."

"I wish we had that ranch?er's ma?chine-?gun," Cuth?bert said wist?ful?ly.

"You know what Cort would say about a gun like that?" Roland asked, and

Cuth?bert burst out laugh?ing. So did Alain.

"Who's Cort?" Su?san asked.

"The tough man El?dred Jonas on?ly thinks he is," Alain said. "He was our teach?er."

Roland sug?gest?ed that they catch an hour or two of sleep—the next day was apt to

be dif?fi?cult. That it might al?so be their last was some?thing he didn't feel he had to

say.

"Alain, are you lis?ten?ing?"

Alain, who knew per?fect?ly well that Roland wasn't speak?ing of his ears or his

at?ten?tion-?span, nod?ded.

"Do you hear any?thing?"

"Not yet."

"Keep at it."

"I will . . . but I can't promise any?thing. The touch is flukey. You know that as well as I do."

"Just keep try?ing."

Sheemie had care?ful?ly spread two blan?kets in the com?er next to his pro?claimed

best friend. "He's Roland . . . and he's Alain . . . who are you, good old Arthur

Heath? Who are you re?al?ly?"

"Cuth?bert's my name." He stuck out his hand. "Cuth?bert All?go?od. How do y'do,

and how do y'do, and how do y'do again?"

Sheemie shook the offered hand, then began giggling. It was a cheer ful,

unexpected sound, and made them all smile. Smiling hurt Roland a little, and he

guessed that if he could see his own face, he'd observe a pretty good bum from

being so close to the exploding dericks.

"Key-youth-bert," Sheemie said, giggling. "Oh my! Key-youth-bert, that's a funny

name, no wonder you're such a funny fellow. Key-youth-bert, oh-aha-ha-ha, that's

a pip, a real pip!"

Cuthbert smiled and nodded. "Can I kill him now, Roland, if we don't need him

any longer?"

"Save him a bit, why don't you?" Roland said, then turned to Susan, his own smile

fading. "Will thee walk out with me a bit, Sue? I'd talk to thee."

She looked up at him, trying to read his face. "All right." She held out her hand.

Roland took it, they walked into the moonlight together, and beneath its light,

Susan felt dread take hold of her heart.

5

They walked out in silence, through sweet-smelling grass that tasted good to cows

and horses even as it was expanding in their bellies, first bloating and then killing

them. It was high—at least a foot taller than Roland's head—and still green as

summer. Children sometimes got lost in the Bad Grass and died there, but Susan

had never feared to be here with Roland, even when there were no sky-markers to

steer by; his sense of direction was uniquely perfect.

"Sue, thee disobeyed me in the matter of the guns," he said at last.

She looked at him, smiling, half-amused and half-angry. "Does thee wish to be

back in thy cell, then? Thee and thy friends?"

"No, of course not. Such bravery!" He held her close and kissed her. When he

drew back, they were both breathing hard. He took her by the arms and looked

into her eyes. "But thee mustn't disobey me this time."

She looked at him steadily, say?ing noth?ing.

"Thee knows," he said. "Thee knows what I'd tell thee."

"Aye, per?haps."

"Say. Bet?ter you than me, maybe."

"I'm to stay at the hut while you and the oth?ers go. Sheemie and I are to stay."

He nod?ded. "Will you? Will thee?"

She thought of how un?fa?mil?iar and wretched Roland's gun had felt in her hand as

she held it be?neath the ser?ape; of the wide, un?be?liev?ing look in Dave's eyes as the

bul?let she'd fired in?to his chest flung him back?ward; of how the first time she'd

tried to shoot Sher?iff Av?ery, the bul?let had on?ly suc?ceed?ed in set?ting her own

cloth?ing afire, al?though he had been right there in front of her. They didn't have a

gun for her (un?less she took one of Roland's), she couldn't use one very well in

any case ... and, more im por?tant, she didn't want to use one. Un?der those

cir?cum?stances, and with Sheemie to think about, too, it was best she just stay out of the way.

Roland was wait?ing pa?tient?ly. She nod?ded. "Sheemie and I'll wait for thee. It's my

promise."

He smiled, re?lieved.

"Now pay me back with hon?esty, Roland."

"If I can."

She looked up at the moon, shud?dered at the ill?-omened face she saw, and looked

back at Roland. "What chance thee'll come back to me?"

He thought about this very care?ful?ly, still hold?ing to her arms. "Far bet?ter than

Jonas thinks," he said at last. "We'll wait at the edge of the Bad Grass and should

be able to mark his com?ing well enough."

"Aye, the herd o' hors?es I saw—"

"He may come with?out the hors?es," Roland said, not know?ing how well he had

matched Jonas's think?ing, "but his folk will make noise even if they come with?out

the herd. If there's enough of them, we'll see them, as well—they'll cut a line

through the grass like a part in hair."

Su?san nod?ded. She had seen this many times from the Drop—the mys?te?ri?ous

part?ing of the Bad Grass as groups of men rode through it.

"If they're look?ing for thee, Roland? If Jonas sends scouts ahead?"

"I doubt he'll both?er." Roland shrugged. "If they do, why, we'll kill them. Silent, if

we can. Killing's what we were trained to do; we'll do it."

She turned her hands over, and now she was grip?ping his arms in?stead of the oth?er

way around. She looked im?pa?tient and afraid. "Thee hasn't an?swered my ques?tion.

What chance I'll see thee back?"

He thought it over. "Even toss," he said at last.

She closed her eyes as if struck, drew in a breath, let it out, opened her eyes again.

"Bad," she said, "yet maybe not as bad as I thought. And if thee doesn't come

back? Sheemie and I go west, as thee said be?fore?"

"Aye, to Gilead. There'll be a place of safe?ty and re?spect for you there, dear, no

mat?ter what . . . but it's es?pe?cial?ly im?por?tant that you go if you don't hear the

tankers ex?plode. Thee knows that, doesn't thee?"

"To warn yer peo?ple—thy ka?tet."

Roland nod?ded.

"I'll warn them, no fear. And keep Sheemie safe, too. He's as much the rea?son

we've got this far as any?thing I've done."

Roland was count?ing on Sheemie for more than she knew. If he and Bert and

Alain were killed, it was Sheemie who would sta?bi?lize her, give her rea?son to go

on.

"When does thee leave?" Su?san asked. "Do we have time to make love?"

"We have time, but per?haps it's best we don't," he said. "It's go?ing to be hard

enough to leave thee again with?out. Un?less you re?al?ly want to . . ." His eyes half-

plead?ed with her to say yes.

"Let's just go back and lie down a bit," she said, and took his hand. For a mo?ment

it trem?bled on her lips to tell him that she was kin?dled with

his child, but at the last

moment she kept silent. There was enough for him to think about without that

added, maybe ... and she didn't want to pass such happy news beneath such an

ugly moon. It would surely be bad luck.

They walked back through high grass that was already springing together along

their path. Outside the hut, he turned her toward him, put his hands on her cheeks,

and softly kissed her again.

"I will love thee forever, Susan," he said. "Come whatever storms."

She smiled. The upward movement of her cheeks spilled a pair of tears from her

eyes. "Come whatever storms," she agreed. She kissed him again, and they went

inside.

6

The moon had begun to descend when a party of eight rode out beneath the arch

with come in peace writ upon it in the Great Letters. Jonas and Reynolds were in

the lead. Behind them came Rhea's black wagon, drawn by a trotting pony that

looked strong enough to go all night and half the next day. Jonas had wanted to

give her a driver, but Rhea refused—"Never was an animal I didn't get on with

better than any man ever could," she'd told him, and that seemed to be true. The

reins lay limp in her lap; the pony worked smart without them. The other five men

consisted of Hash Renfrew, Quint, and three of Renfrew's best vaqueros.

Coral had wanted to come as well, but Jonas had different ideas. "If we're killed,

you can go on more or less as before," he'd said. "There'll be nothing to tie you to

us."

"Without ye, I'm not sure there'd be any reason to go on," she said.

"Ar, quit that schoolgirl shit, it don't become you. You'd find plenty of reasons to

keep staggering down the path, if you had to put your mind to

it. If all goes

well—as I expect it will—and you still want to be with me, ride out of here as

soon as you get word of our success. There's a town west of here in the Vi Castis

Moun?tains. Ritzy. Go there on the fastest horse you can swing a leg over. You'll

be there ahead of us by days, no matter how smart we're able to push along. Find a

respectable inn that'll take a woman on her own . . . if there is such a thing in

Ritzy. Wait. When we get there with the tankers, you just fall in? to the column at

my right hand. Have you got it?"

She had it. One woman in a thousand was Coral Thorin—sharp as Lord Satan, and

able to fuck like Satan's favorite harlot. Now if things only turned out to be as

simple as he'd made them sound.

Jonas fell back until his horse was pacing alongside the black cart. The ball was

out of its bag and lay in Rhea's lap. "Anything?" he asked. He both hoped and

dreaded to see that deep pink pulse inside it again.

"Nay. It'll speak when it needs to, though—count on it."

"Then what good are you, old woman?"

"Ye'll know when the time comes," Rhea said, looking at him with arrogance (and

some fear as well, he was happy to see).

Jonas spurred his horse back to the head of the little column. He had decided to

take the ball from Rhea at the slightest sign of trouble. In truth, it had already

inserted its strange, adicting sweetness into his head; he thought about that single

pink pulse of light he'd seen far too much.

Balls, he told himself. Battlesweat's all I've got. Once this business is over, I'll be

my old self again.

Nice if true, but...

... but he had, in truth, begun to wonder.

Renfrew was now riding with Clay. Jonas nudged his horse in between them. His

dicky leg was aching like a bastard; another bad sign.

"Lengyll?" he asked Renfrew.

"Putting to?geth?er a good bunch," Ren?frew said, "don't you fear Fran Lengyll.

Thir?ty men."

"Thir?ty! God Har?ry's body, I told you I want?ed forty! Forty at least!"

Ren?frew mea?sured him with a pale-?eyed glance, then winced at a par tic?ular?ly

vi?cious gust of the fresh?en?ing wind. He pulled his neck?er?chief up over his mouth

and nose. The vaqs rid?ing be?hind had al?ready done so. "How afraid of these three

boys are you, Jonas?"

"Afraid for both of us, I guess, since you're too stupid to know who they are or

what they're ca?pa?ble of." He raised his own neck?er?chief, then forced his voice in?to

a more rea?son?able tim?bre. It was best he do so; he need?ed these bump?kins yet

awhile longer. Once the ball was turned over to Lati?go, that might change.

"Though may?hap we'll nev?er see them."

"It's like?ly they're al?ready thir?ty miles from here and rid?ing west as fast as their

hors?es'll take em," Ren?frew agreed. "I'd give a crown to know how they got

loose."

What does it mat?ter, you id?iot? Jonas thought, but said noth?ing.

"As for Lengyll's men, they'll be the hard?est boys he can lay hands on—if it comes

to a fight, those thir?ty will fight like six?ty."

Jonas's eyes briefly met Clay's. I'll be?lieve it when I see it, Clay's brief glance said,

and Jonas knew again why he had al?ways liked this one bet?ter than Roy De?pape.

"How many armed?"

"With guns? Maybe half. They'll be no more than an hour be?hind us."

"Good." At least their back door was cov?ered. It would have to do. And he

couldn't wait to be rid of that thrice-?cursed ball.

Oh? whis?pered a sly, half-?mad voice from a place much deep?er than his heart. Oh,

can't you?

Jonas ig?nored the voice un?til it stilled. Half an hour lat?er,

they turned off the road

and on?to the Drop. Sev?er?al miles ahead, mov?ing in the wind
like a sil?ver sea, was
the Bad Grass.

7

Around the time that Jonas and his par?ty were rid?ing down
the Drop, Roland,

Cuth?bert, and Alain were swing?ing up in?to their sad?dles.
Su?san and Sheemie stood

by the door?way to the hut, hold?ing hands and watch ing them
solemn?ly.

"Thee'll hear the ex?plo?sions when the tankers go, and smell
the smoke," Roland

said. "Even with the wind the wrong way, I think thee'll smell it.
Then, no more

than an hour lat?er, more smoke. There." He point?ed. "That'll
be the brush piled in

front of the canyon's mouth."

"And if we don't see those things?"

"In?to the west. But thee will, Sue. I swear thee will."

She stepped for?ward, put her hands on his thigh, and looked up
at him in the

laten?ing moon?light. He bent; put his hand light?ly against the
back of her head; put

his mouth on her mouth.

"Go thy course in safe?ty," Su?san said as she drew back from
him.

"Aye," Sheemie added sud?den?ly. "Stand and be true, all
three." He came for?ward

him?self and shy?ly touched Cuth?bert's boot.

Cuth?bert reached down, took Sheemie's hand, and shook it.
"Take care of her, old
boy."

Sheemie nod?ded se?ri?ous?ly. "I will."

"Come on," Roland said. He felt that if he looked at her solemn,
up turned face

again, he would cry. "Let's go."

They rode slow?ly away from the hut. Be?fore the grass closed
be?hind them, hid?ing

it from view, he looked back a fi?nal time.

"Sue, I love thee."

She smiled. It was a beau?ti?ful smile. "Bird and bear and hare
and fish," she said.

The next time Roland saw her, she was caught in?side the Wiz?
ard's glass.

What Roland and his friends saw west of the Bad Grass had a harsh, lone?ly

beau?ty. The wind was lift?ing great sheets of sand across the stony desert floor; the

moon?light turned these in?to foot rac?ing phan?toms. At moments Hang?ing Rock

was vis?ible some two wheels dis?tant, and the mouth of Eye?bolt Canyon two

wheels far?ther on. Some?times both were gone, hid?den by the dust. Be?hind them,

the tall grass made a sough?ing, singing sound.

“How do you boys feel?” Roland asked. “All’s well?”

They nod?ded.

“There’s go?ing to be a lot of shoot?ing, I think.”

“We’ll re?mem?ber the faces of our fa?thers,” Cuth?bert said.

“Yes,” Roland agreed, al?most ab?sent?ly. “We’ll re?mem?ber them very well.” He

stretched in the sad?dle. “The wind’s in our fa?vor, not theirs—that’s one good

thing. We’ll hear them com?ing. We must judge the size of the group. All right?”

They both nod?ded.

“If Jonas has still got his con?fi?dence, he’ll come soon, in a small par?ty—what?ev?er

gun?nies he can put to?geth?er on short no?tice—and he’ll have the ball. In that case,

we’ll am?bush them, kill them all, and take the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow.”

Alain and Cuth?bert sat qui?et, lis?ten?ing in?tent?ly. The wind gust?ed, and Roland

clapped a hand to his hat to keep it from fly?ing off. “If he fears more trou?ble from

us, I think he’s apt to come lat?er on, and with a big?ger par?ty of rid?ers. If that

hap?pens, we’ll let them pass . . . then, if the wind is our friend and keeps up, we’ll

fall in be?hind them.”

Cuth?bert be?gan to grin. “Oh Roland,” he said. “Your fa?ther would be proud. On?ly

four?teen, but cozy as the dev?il!”

“Fif?teen come next moon?rise,” Roland said se?ri?ous?ly. “If we do it this way, we

may have to kill their drogue rid?ers. Watch my sig?nals, all right?”

“We’re go’ing to cross to Hang’ing Rock as part of their party?” Alain asked. He

had al’ways been a step or two be’hind Cuth’bert, but Roland didn’t mind;

some’times re’li’abil’ity was bet’ter than quick’ness. “Is that it?”

“If the cards fall that way, yes.”

“If they’ve got the pink ball with em, you’d bet’ter hope it doesn’t give us away,”

Alain said.

Cuth’bert looked sur’prised. Roland bit his lip, think’ing that some’times Alain was

plen’ty quick. Cer’tain’ly he had come up with this un’pleas’ant lit tle idea ahead of

Bert . . . ahead of Roland, too.

“We’ve got a lot to hope for this morn’ing, but we’ll play our cards as they come off the top of the pack.”

They dis’mount’ed and sat by their hors’es there on the edge of the grass, say’ing

lit’tle. Roland watched the sil’ver clouds of dust rac’ing each oth’er across the desert

floor and thought of Su’san. He imag’ined them mar’ried, liv’ing in a free’hold

some’where south of Gilead. By then Far’son would have been de’feat’ed, the world’s

strange de’cline re’veersed (the child’ish part of him sim’ply as’sumed that mak’ing an

end to John Far’son would some’how see to that), and his gun’sling’ing days would

be over. Less than a year it had been since he had won the right to car’ry the six-

shoot’ers he wore on his hips—and to car’ry his fa’ther’s great re’volvers when

Steven De’schain de’cid’ed to pass them on—and al’ready he was tired of them.

Su’san’s kiss’es had soft’ened his heart and quick’ened him, some how; had made

an’oth’er life pos’si’ble. A bet’ter one, per’haps. One with a house, and kid’dies, and—

“They’re com’ing,” Alain said, snap’ping Roland out of his rever’ie.

The gun’slinger stood up, Rush’er’s reins in one fist. Cuth’bert stood tense’ly near’by.

“Large party or small? Does thee ... do you know?”

Alain stood facing south-east, hands held out with the palms up. Beyond his shoulder, Roland saw Old Star just about to slip below the horizon. Only an hour until dawn, then.

"I can't tell yet," Alain said.

"Can you at least tell if the ball—"

"No. Shut up, Roland, let me listen!"

Roland and Cuthbert stood and watched Alain anxiously, at the same time

straining their ears to hear the hooves of horses, the creak of wheels, or the

murmur of men on the passing wind. Time spun out. The wind, rather than

dropping as Old Star disappeared and dawn approached, blew more fiercely than

ever. Roland looked at Cuthbert, who had taken out his sling-shot and was playing

nerveously with the pull. Bert raised one shoulder in a shrug.

"It's a small party," Alain said suddenly. "Can either of you touch them?"

They shook their heads.

"No more than ten, maybe only six."

"Gods!" Roland murmured, and pumped a fist at the sky. He couldn't help it. "And the ball?"

"I can't touch it," Alain said. He sounded almost as though he were sleeping

himself. "But it's with them, don't you think?"

Roland did. A small party of six or eight, probably traveling with the ball. It was

perfect.

"Be ready, boys," he said. "We're going to take them."

9

Jonas's party made good time down the Drop and into the Bad Grass. The guide-

stars were brilliant in the autumn sky, and Renfrew knew them all. He had a click-

line to measure between the two he called The Twins, and he stopped the group

briefly every twenty minutes or so to use it. Jonas hadn't the slightest doubt the old

cowboy would bring them out of the tall grass pointed straight at Hanging Rock.

Then, about an hour after they'd entered the Bad Grass, Quint

rode up be?side him.

“That old la?dy, she want to see you, sai. She say it’s im?por?tant.”

“Do she, now?” Jonas asked.

“Aye.” Quint low?ered his voice. “That ball she got on her lap all glowy.”

“Is that so? I tell you what. Quint—keep my old trail-?bud?dies com pa?ny while I

see what’s what.” He dropped back un?til he was pac?ing be side the black cart.

Rhea raised her face to him, and for a mo?ment, washed as it was in the pink light,

he thought it the face of a young girl.

“So,” she said. “Here y’are, big boy. I thought ye’d show up pret?ty smart.” She

cack?led, and as her face broke in?to its sour lines of laugh?ter, Jonas again saw her

as she re?al?ly was—all but sucked dry by the thing in her lap. Then he looked down

at it him?self . . . and was lost. He could feel that pink glow ra?di?at?ing in?to all the

deep?est pas?sages and hol?lows of his mind, light?ing them up in a way they’d nev?er

been lit up be?fore. Even Coral, at her dirty bus?iest, couldn’t light him up that way.

“Ye like it, don’t ye?” she half-?laughed, half-?crooned. “Aye, so ye do, so would

any?one, such a pret?ty glam it is! But what do ye see, sai Jonas?”

Lean?ing over, hold?ing to the sad?dle-?horn with one hand, his long hair hang?ing

down in a sheaf, Jonas looked deeply in?to the ball. At first he saw on?ly that

lus?cious, labi?al pink, and then it be?gan to draw apart. Now he saw a hut

sur?round?ed by tall grass. The sort of hut on?ly a her?mit could love. The door—it

was paint?ed a peel?ing but still bright red—stood open. And sit?ting there on the

stone stoop with her hands in her lap, her blan?kets on the ground at her feet, and

her un?bound hair around her shoul?ders was ...

“I’ll be damned!” Jonas whis?pered. He had now leaned so far out of the sad?dle that

he looked like a trick rid?er in a cir?cus show, and his eyes

seemed to have

disappeared; there were only socks of pink light where they had been.

Rhea cackled delightedly. "Aye, it's Thorin's gilly that never was! Dearborn's

lover-girl!" Her cackling stopped abruptly. "Lover-girl of the young prodigy who

killed my Ermot. And he'll pay for it, aye, so he will. Look closer, sai Jonas! Look

closer!"

He did. Everything was clear now, and he thought he should have seen it earlier.

Everything this girl's aunt had feared had been true. Rhea had known, although

why she hadn't told anyone the girl had been screwing one of the In-World boys,

Jonas didn't know. And Susan had done more than just screw Will Dearborn; she'd

helped him escape, him and his trail-mates, and she might well have killed two

lawmen for him, into the bargain.

The figure in the ball swam closer. Watching that made him feel a little dizzy, but

it was a pleasant dizziness. Beyond the girl was the hut, faintly lit by a lamp which

had been turned down to the barest core of flame. At first Jonas thought someone

was sleeping in one corner, but on second glance he decided it was only a heap of

hides that looked vaguely human.

"Do'ee spy the boys?" Rhea asked, seeming from a great distance. "Do'ee spy

em, m'lord sai?"

"No," he said, his own voice seeming to come from that same distant place. His

eyes were pinned to the ball. He could feel its light baking deeper and deeper into

his brain. It was a good feeling, like a hot fire on a cold night. "She's alone. Looks

as if she's waiting."

"Aye." Rhea gestured above the ball—a curt dusting-off movement of the

hands—and the pink light was gone. Jonas gave a low, protesting cry, but no

matter; the ball was dark again. He wanted to stretch his

hands out and tell her to

make the light re?turn—to beg her, if nec?es?sary—and held him?self back by pure

force of will. He was re?ward?ed by a slow re?turn of his wits. It helped to re?mind

him?self that Rhea’s ges?tures were as mean?ing?less as the pup?pets in a Pinch and

Jil?ly show. The ball did what it want?ed, not what she want?ed.

Mean?while, the ug?ly old wom?an was look?ing at him with eyes that were

per?verse?ly shrewd and clear. “Wait?ing for what, do’ee sup?pose?” she asked.

There was on?ly one thing she could be wait?ing for. Jonas thought with ris?ing

alarm. The boys. The three beard?less sons of bitch?es from In?-World. And if they

weren’t with her, they might well be up ahead, do?ing their own wait?ing.

Wait?ing for him. Pos?si?bly even wait?ing for—

“Lis?ten to me,” he said. “I’ll on?ly speak once, and you best an?swer true. Do they

know about that thing? Do those three boys know about the Rain?bow?”

Her eyes shift?ed away from his. It was an?swer enough in one way, but not in

an?oth?er. She had had things her way all too long up there on her hill; she had to

know who was boss down here. He leaned over again and grabbed her shoul?der. It

was hor?ri?ble—like grab?bing a bare bone that some?how still lived—but he made

him?self hold on all the same. And squeeze. She moaned and wrig?gled, but he held

on.

“Tell me, you old bitch! Run your fuck?ing gob!”

“They might know of it,” she whined. “The girl might’ve seen some thing the night

she came to be—am-, let go, ye’re killing me!”

“If I want?ed to kill you, you’d be dead.” He took an?oth?er long?ing glance at the ball,

then sat up straight in the sad?dle, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called:

“Clay! Hold up!” As Reynolds and Ren frew reined back, Jonas raised a hand to

halt the vaqs be?hind him.

The wind whis?pered through the grass, bend?ing it, rip?pling it, whip ping up ed?dies

of sweet smell. Jonas stared ahead in?to the dark, even though he knew it was

fruit?less to look for them. They could be any where, and Jonas didn't like the odds

in an am?bush. Not one bit.

He rode to where Clay and Ren?frew were wait?ing. Ren?frew looked im?pa?tient.

"What's the prob?lem? Dawn'll be break?ing soon. We ought to get a move?-on."

"Do you know the huts in the Bad Grass?"

"Aye, most. Why—"

"Do you know one with a red door?"

Ren?frew nod?ded and point?ed nor?thish. "Old Soony's place. He had some sort of

re?li?gious con?ver?sion—a dream or a vi?sion or some?thing. That's when he paint?ed

the door of his hut red. He's gone to the Man?ni?-folk these last five years." He no

longer asked why, at least; he had seen some?thing on Jonas's face that had shut up

his ques?tions.

Jonas raised his hand, looked at the blue cof?fin tat?tooed there for a sec?ond, then

turned and called for Quint. "You're in charge," Jonas told him.

Quint's shag?gy eye?brows shot up. "Me?"

"Yar. But you're not go?ing on—there's been a change of plan."

"What—"

"Lis?ten and don't open your mouth again un?less there's some?thing you don't

un?der?stand. Get that damned black cart turned around. Put your men around it and

hie on back the way we came. Join up with Lengyll and his men. Tell them Jonas

says wait where you find em un?til he and Rey nolds and Ren?frew come. Clear?"

Quint nod?ded. He looked be?wil?dered but said noth?ing.

"Good. Get about it. And tell the witch to put her toy back in its bag." Jonas

passed a hand over his brow. Fin?gers which had rarely shak?en be?fore had now

picked up a minute trem?ble. "It's dis?tract?ing."

Quint start?ed away, then looked back when Jonas called his

name.

"I think those In-World boys are out here, Quint. Probably ahead of where we are

now, but if they're back the way you're going, they'll probably set on you."

Quint looked nervously around at the grass, which rose higher than his head. Then

his lips tightened and he returned his attention to Jonas.

"If they attack, they'll try to take the ball," Jonas continued. "And sai, mark me

well: any man who doesn't die protecting it will wish he had." He lifted his chin at

the vaqs, who sat astride their horses in a line behind the black cart. "Tell them

that."

"Aye, boss," Quint said.

"When you reach Lengyll's party, you'll be safe."

"How long should we wait for yer if ye don't come?"

"Til hell freezes over. Now go." As Quint left, Jonas turned to Reynolds and

Renfrew. "We're going to make a little side-trip, boys," he said.

10

"Roland." Alain's voice was low and urgent. "They've turned around."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's another group coming along behind them. A much larger one. That's

where they're headed."

"Safety in numbers, that's all," Cuthbert said.

"Do they have the ball?" Roland asked. "Can you touch it yet?"

"Yes, they have it. It makes them easy to touch even though they're going the

other way now. Once you find it, it glows like a lamp in a mine-shaft."

"Does Rhea still have the keeping of it?"

"I think so. It's awful to touch her."

"Jonas is afraid of us," Roland said. "He wants more men around him when he

comes. That's what it is, what it must be." Unaware that he was both right and

badly out in his reckoning. Unaware that for one of the few times since they had

left Gilead, he had lapsed into a teenager's disastrous certainty.

“What do we do?” Alain asked.

“Sit here. Lis?ten. Wait. They’ll bring the ball this way again if they’re go?ing to

Hang?ing Rock. They’ll have to.”

“Su?san?” Cuth?bert asked. “Su?san and Sheemie? What about them? How do we

know they’re all right?”

”I sup?pose that we don’t.“ Roland sat down, cross?-legged, with Push?er’s trail?ing

reins in his lap. ”But Jonas and his men will be back soon enough. And when they

come, we’ll do what we must.“

11

Su?san hadn’t want?ed to sleep in?side—the hut felt wrong to her with?out Roland.

She had left Sheemie hud?dled un?der the old hides in the com?er and tak?en her own

blan?kets out?side. She sat in the hut’s door?way for a lit tle while, look?ing up at the

stars and pray?ing for Roland in her own fash ion. When she be?gan to feel a lit?tle

bet?ter, she lay down on one blan?ket and pulled the oth?er over her. It seemed an

eter?ni?ty since Maria had shak?en her out of her heavy sleep, and the open?-mouthed,

glot?tal snores drift?ing out of the hut didn’t both?er her much. She slept with her

head pil lowed on one arm, and didn’t wake when, twen?ty min?utes lat?er, Sheemie

came to the door?way, blinked at her sleep?ily, and then walked off in?to the grass to

uri?nate. The on?ly one to no?tice him was Capri?choso, who stuck out his long

muz?zle and took a nip at Sheemie’s butt as the boy passed him. Sheemie, still

most?ly asleep, reached back and pushed the muz?zle away. He knew Capi’s tricks

well enough, so he did.

Su?san dreamed of the wil?low grove—bird and bear and hare and fish—and what

woke her wasn’t Sheemie’s re?turn from his nec?es?sary but a cold cir?cle of steel

press?ing in?to her neck. There was a loud click that she rec?og?nized at once from the

Sher?iff’s of?fice: a pis?tol be?ing cocked. The wil?low grove

fad?ed from the eye of her
mind.

"Shine, lit?tle sun?beam," said a voice. For a mo?ment her be?
wil?dered, half?wak?ing

mind tried to be?lieve it was yes?ter?day, and Maria want?ed
her to get up and out of

Seafront be?fore who?ev?er had killed May?or Thorin and
Chan?cel?lor Rimer could
come back and kill her, as well.

No good. It wasn't the strong light of mid?morn?ing that her
eyes opened up?on, but

the ash?pal?lid glow of five o'clock. Not a wom?an's voice but a
man's. And not a

hand shak?ing her shoul?der but the bar?rel of a gun against her
neck.

She looked up and saw a lined, nar?row face framed by white
hair. Lips no more

than a scar. Eyes the same fad?ed blue as Roland's. El?dred
Jonas. The man stand?ing

be?hind him had bought her own da drinks once up?on a hap?
pi?er time: Hash

Ren?frew. A third man, one of Jonas's ka?tet, ducked in?to the
hut. Freez?ing ter?ror

filled her mid?sec?tion—some for her, some for Sheemie. She
wasn't sure the boy

would even un?der?stand what was hap?pen?ing to them. These
are two of the three

men who tried to kill him, she thought. He'll un?der?stand that
much.

"Here you are, Sun?beam, here you come," Jonas said com?pan?
ion?ably, watch?ing

her blink away the sleep?fog. "Good! You shouldn't be nap?ping
all the way out here

on your own, not a pret?ty sai such as your?self. But don't wor?
ry, I'll see you get

back to where you be?long."

His eyes flicked up as the red?head with the cloak stepped out of
the hut. Alone.

"What's she got in there. Clay? Any?thing?"

Reynolds shook his head. "All still on the hoss, I reck?on."

Sheemie, Su?san thought. Where are you, Sheemie?

Jonas reached out and ca?ressed one of her breasts briefly.

"Nice," he said. "Ten?der

and sweet. No won?der Dear?born likes you."

"Get yer filthy blue?marked hand off me, you bas?tard."

Smiling, Jonas did as she bid. He turned "his head and regarded the mule. "I know

this one; it belongs to my good friend Coral. Along with everything else, you've

turned livestock thief! Shameful, shameful, this younger generation. Don't you

agree, sai Renfrew?"

But her father's old associate said nothing. His face was carefully blank, and Su'san

thought he might be just the tiniest tad ashamed of his presence here.

Jonas turned back to her, his thin lips curved in the semblance of a benevolent

smile. "Well, after murder I suppose stealing a mule comes easy, don't it?"

She said nothing, only watched as Jonas stroked Capi's muzzle.

"What all were they hauling, those boys, that it took a mule to put it on?"

"Shrouds," she said through numb lips. "For you and all your friends. A fearful

heavy load it made, too—near broke the poor animal's back."

"There's a saying in the land I come from," Jonas said, still smiling. "Clever girls

go to hell. Ever heard it?" He went on stroking Capi's nose. The mule liked it; his

neck was thrust out to its full length, his stupid little eyes half-closed with

pleasure. "Has it crossed your mind that fellows who unload their pack animal,

split up what it was carrying, and take the goods away usually ain't coming back?"

Su'san said nothing.

"You've been left high and dry, Sunbeam. Fast fucked is usually fast forgotten, sad to

say. Do you know where they went?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was low, barely a whisper.

Jonas looked pleased. "If you was to tell, things might go easier for you. Would

you agree, Renfrew?"

"Aye," Renfrew said. "They're traitors, Su'san—for the Good Man. If you know

where they are or what they're up to, tell us."

Keeping her eyes fixed on Jonas, Su'san said: "Come closer." Her numbed lips

didn't want to move and it came out sound?ing like Cung glos?
er, but Jonas

un?der?stood and leaned for?ward, stretch?ing his neck in a way
that made him look

ab?surd?ly like Capri?choso. When he did, Su?san spat in his
face.

Jonas re?coiled, lips twist?ing in sur?prise and re?vul?sion. "Ar?
rr! BITCH!" he cried,

and launched a full-?swung, open-?hand?ed blow that drove her
to the ground. She

land?ed at full length on her side with black stars ex plod?ing
across her field of

vi?sion. She could al?ready feel her right cheek swelling like a
bal?loon and thought,

If he'd hit an inch or two low?er, he might've bro?ken my neck.
May?hap that

would've been best. She raised her hand to her nose and wiped
blood from the

right nos?tril.

Jonas turned to Ren?frew, who had tak?en a sin?gle step for?
ward and then stopped

him?self. "Put her on her horse and tie her hands in front of her.
Tight." He looked

down at Su?san, then kicked her in the shoul?der hard enough
to send her rolling

to?ward the hut. "Spit on me, would you? Spit on El?dred Jonas,
would you, you

bitch?"

Reynolds was hold?ing out his neck?er?chief. Jonas took it,
wiped the spit?tle from his

face with it, then dropped in?to a hun?ker be?side her. He took
a hand?ful of her hair

and care?ful?ly wiped the neck?er?chief with it. Then he hauled
her to her feet. Tears

of pain now peeped from the com?ers of her eyes, but she kept
silent.

"I may nev?er see your friend again, sweet Sue with the ten?der
lit?tle tit?ties, but I've

got you, ain't I? Yar. And if Dear?born gives us trou?ble, I'll give
you dou?ble. And

make sure Dear?born knows. You may count on it."

His smile fad?ed, and he gave her a sud?den, bit?ter shove that
al?most sent her

sprawl?ing again.

"Now get mount?ed, and do it be?fore I de?cide to change your

face a lit tle with my
knife.”

12

Sheemie watched from the grass, ter?ri?fied and silent?ly cry?
ing, as Su?san spit in the

bad Cof?fin Hunter’s face and was knocked to the ground, hit so
hard the blow

might have killed her. He al?most rushed out then, but some
thing—it could have

been his friend Arthur’s voice in his head—told him that would
on?ly get him

killed.

He watched as Su?san mount?ed. One of the oth?er men—not a
Cof?fin Hunter but a

big ranch?er Sheemie had seen in the Rest from time to time—
tried to help, but

Su?san pushed him away with the sole of her boot. The man
stood back with a red

face.

Don’t make em mad, Su?san, Sheemie thought. Oh gods, don’t
do that, they’ll hit ye

some more! Oh, yer poor face! And ye got a nose?bleed, so you
do!

“Last chance,” Jonas told her. “Where are they, and what do
they mean to do?”

“Go to hell,” she said.

He smiled—a thin, hur?ty smile. “Like?ly I’ll find you there
when I ar rive,” he said.

Then, to the oth?er Cof?fin Hunter: “You checked the place
care?ful?”

“What?ev?er they had, they took it,” the red?head an?swered.
“On?ly thing they left was

Dear?born’s punch-?bun?ny.”

That made Jonas laugh meany-?mean as he climbed on board
his own horse.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s ride.”

They went back in?to the Bad Grass. It closed around them, and
it was as if they

had nev?er been there . . . ex?cept that Su?san was gone, and so
was Capi. The big

ranch?er rid?ing be?side Su?san had been lead?ing the mule.

When he was sure they weren’t go?ing to re?turn, Sheemie
walked slow?ly back in?to

the clear?ing, do?ing up the but?ton on top of his pants as he
came. He looked from

the way Roland and his friends had gone to the one in which Su?san had been

tak?en. Which?

A mo?ment's thought made him re?al?ize there was no choice. The grass out here was

tough and springy. The path Roland and Alain and good old Arthur Heath (so

Sheemie still thought of him, and al?ways would) had tak?en was gone. The one

made by Su?san and her cap?tors, on the oth?er hand, was still clear. And per?haps, if

he fol?lowed her, he could do some thing for her. Help her.

Walk?ing at first, then jog?ging as his fear that they might dou?ble back and catch

him dis?si?pat?ed, Sheemie went in the di?rec?tion Su?san had been tak?en. He would

fol?low her most of that day.

13

Cuth?bert—not the most san?guine of per?son?al?ities in any sit?ua?tion—grew more and

more im?pa?tient as the day bright?ened to?ward true dawn. It's Reap?ing, he thought.

Fi?nal?ly Reap?ing, and here we sit with our knives sharp?ened and not a thing in the world to cut.

Twice he asked Alain what he “heard.” The first time Alain on?ly grunt?ed. The

sec?ond time he asked what Bert ex?pect?ed him to hear, with some?one yap?ping away in his ear like that.

Cuth?bert, who did not con?sid?er two en?quiries fif?teen min?utes apart as “yap?ping

away,” wan?dered off and sat mo?rose?ly in front of his horse. Af?ter a bit, Roland

came over and sat down be?side him.

“Wait?ing,” Cuth?bert said. “That's what most of our time in Mejis has been about,

and it's the thing I do worst.”

“You won't have to do it much longer,” Roland said.

14

Jonas's com?pa?ny reached the place where Fran Lengyll's par?ty had made a

tem?po?rary camp about an hour af?ter the sun had topped the hori?zon. Quint, Rhea,

and Ren?frew's vaqs were al?ready there and drink?ing cof?fee,

Jonas was glad to see.

Lengyll start?ed for?ward, saw Su?san rid?ing with her hands tied, and ac tu?al?ly drew

back a step, as if he want?ed to find a com?er to hide in. There were no com?ers out

here, how?ev?er, so he stood fast. He did not look hap?py about it, how?ev?er.

Su?san nudged her horse for?ward with her knees, and when Reynolds tried to grab

her shoul?der, she dipped it to the side, tem?porar?ily elud ing him.

“Why, Fran?cis Lengyll! Imag?ine meet?ing you here!”

“Su?san, I’m sor?ry to see ye so,” Lengyll said. His flush crept clos?er and clos?er to

his brow, like a tide ap?proach?ing a sea?wall. “It’s bad com pa?ny ye’ve fall?en in

with, girl . . . and in the end, bad com?pa?ny al?ways leaves ye to face the mu?sic

alone.”

Su?san ac?tu?al?ly laughed. “Bad com?pa?ny!“ she said. “Aye, ye’d know about that,

wouldn’t ye, Fran?“

He turned, awk?ward and stiff in his em?bar?rass?ment. She raised one boot?ed foot

and, be?fore any?one could stop her, kicked him square?ly be tween the

shoul?derblades. He went down on his stom?ach, his whole face widen?ing in

shocked sur?prise.

“No ye don’t, ye bold cunt!“ Ren?frew shout?ed, and fetched her a wal lop to the

side of the head—it was on the left, and at least evened things up a bit, she would

think lat?er when her mind cleared and she was ca?pa?ble of think?ing. She swayed in

the sad?dle, but kept her seat. And she nev?er looked at Ren?frew, on?ly at Lengyll,

who had now man?aged to get to his hands and knees. He wore a deeply dazed

ex?pres?sion.

“You killed my fa?ther!“ she screamed at him. “You killed my fa?ther, you cow?ard?ly,

sneak?ing ex?cuse for a man!“ She looked at the par?ty of ranch?ers and vaqs, all of

them star?ing at her now. “There he is, Fran Lengyll, head of the

Horse?men's

As?so?ci?ation, as low a sneak as ev?er walked! Low as coy?ote
shit! Low as— “

”That’s enough,” Jonas said, watch?ing with some in?ter?est as
Lengyll scut?tled back

to his men—and yes, Su?san was bit?ter?ly de?light?ed to see, it
was a full-?fledged

scut?tle—with his shoul?ders hunched. Rhea was cack ling,
rock?ing from side to

side and mak?ing a sound like fin?ger?nails on a piece of slate.
The sound shocked

Su?san, but she wasn’t a bit sur?prised by Rhea’s pres?ence in
this com?pa?ny.

”It could nev?er be enough,” she said, look?ing from Jonas to
Lengyll with an

ex?pres?sion of con?tempt so deep it seemed bot?tom?less. ”For
him it could nev?er be
enough.“

”Well, per?haps, but you did quite well in the time you had, la?
dy-?sai. Few could

have done bet?ter. And lis?ten to the witch cack?le! Like salt in
his wounds, I wot . . .

but we’ll shut her up soon enough.“ Then, turn?ing his head:
”Clay!“

Reynolds rode up.

”Think you can get Sun?beam back to Seafront all right?“

”I think so.“ Reynolds tried not to show the re?lief he felt at be?
ing sent back east

in?stead of west. He had be?gun to have a bad feel?ing about
Hang ing Rock, Lati?go,

the tankers . . . about the whole show, re?al?ly. God knew why.
”Now?“

”Give it an?oth?er minute,” Jonas said. ”May?hap there’s go?ing
to be a spot of killing

right here. Who knows? But it’s the unan?swered ques?tions that
makes it

worth?while get?ting up in the morn?ing, even when a man’s
leg aches like a tooth

with a hole in it. Wouldn’t you say so?“

”I don’t know, El?dred.“

”Sai Ren?frew, watch our pret?ty Sun?beam a minute. I have a
piece of prop?er?ty to
take back.“

His voice car?ried well—he had meant that it should—and
Rhea’s cack?les cut off

sud?den?ly, as if sev?ered out of her throat with a hook?ing-? knife. Smil?ing, Jonas

walked his horse to?ward the black cart with its jost ling show of gold sym?bols.

Reynolds rode on his left, and Jonas sensed rather than saw De? pape fall in on his

right. Roy was a good enough boy, re?al?ly; his head was a lit? tle soft, but his heart

was in the right place, and you didn't have to tell him ev?ery? thing.

For ev?ery step for?ward Jonas's horse took, Rhea shrank back a lit?tle in the cart.

Her eyes shift?ed from side to side in their deep sock?ets, look ing for a way out that wasn't there.

"Keep away from me, ye char?ry man!" she cried, rais?ing a hand to?ward him. With

the oth?er she clutched the sack with the ball in it ev?er more tight?ly. "Keep away, or

I'll bring the light?ning and strike ye dead where ye sit yer horse! Yer har?ri?er

friends, too!"

Jonas thought Roy hes?itat?ed briefly at that, but Clay nev?er did, nor did Jonas

him?self. He guessed there was a great lot she could do ... or that there had been, at

one time. But that was be?fore the hun?gry glass had en tered her life.

"Give it up to me," he said. He reached the side of her wag?on and held his hand

out for the bag. "It's not yours and nev?er was. One day you'll doubt?less have the

Good Man's thanks for keep?ing it so well as you have, but now you must give it up."

She screamed—a sound of such pierc?ing in?ten?si?ty that sev? er?al of the va?que?ros

dropped their tin cof?fee-?cups and clapped their hands over their ears. At the same

time she knot?ted her hand through the draw?string and raised the bag over her head.

The curved shape of the ball swung back and forth at the bot? tom of it like a

pen?du?lum.

"I'll not!" she howled. "I'll smash it on the ground be?fore I give

it up to the likes o'
you!"

Jonas doubt?ed if the ball would break, not hurled by her weak
arms on?to the

tram?pled, springy mat of the Bad Grass, but he didn't think he
would have

oc?ca?sion to find out, one way or the oth?er.

"Clay," he said. "Draw your gun."

He didn't need to look at Clay to see that he'd done it; he saw
the fran?tic way her

eyes shift?ed to the left, where Clay sat his horse.

"I'm go?ing to have a count," Jonas said. "Just a short one; if I
get to three and she

hasn't passed that bag over, blow her ug?ly head off."

"Aye."

"One," Jonas said, watch?ing the ball pen?du?lum back and
forth at the bot?tom of the

up?held bag. It was glow?ing; he could see dull pink even
through the cloth. "Two.

En?joy hell, Rhea, good?bye. Thr—"

"Here!" she screamed, thrust?ing it out to?ward him and shield?
ing her face with the

crooked hook of her free hand. "Here, take it! And may it damn
you the way it's

damned me!"

"Thankee?-sai."

He grabbed the bag just be?low the draw top and yanked. Rhea
screamed again as

the string skinned her knuck?les and tore off one of her nails.
Jonas hard?ly heard.

His mind was a white ex?plo?sion of ex?ul?ta?tion. For the first
time in his long

pro?fes?sion?al life he for?got his job, his sur round?ings, and
the six thou?sand things

that could get him killed on any day. He had it; he had it; by all
the graves of all

the gods, he had the fuck ing thing!

Mine! he thought, and that was all. He some?how re?strained
the urge to open the

bag and stick his head in?side it, like a horse stick?ing its head
in?to a bag of oats,

and looped the draw?string over the pom?mel of his sad?dle
twice in?stead. He took in

a breath as deep as his lungs would al?low, then ex?pelled it.
Bet?ter. A lit?tle.

“Roy.”

“Aye, Jonas.”

It would be good to get out of this place, Jonas thought, and not for the first time.

To get away from these hicks. He was sick of aye and ye and so it is, sick to his bones.

“Roy, we’ll give the bitch a ten-count this time. If she isn’t out of my sight by then,

you have my permission to blow her ass off. Now, let’s see if you can do the

counting. I’ll be listening close, so mind you don’t skip any!”

“One,” Deppa said eagerly. “Two. Three. Four.”

Spitting curses, Rhea snatched up the reins of the cart and spanked the pony’s back

with them. The pony laid its ears back and jerked the cart forward so vigorously

that Rhea went tumbling backward off the cant-board, her feet up, her white and

bony shins showing above her ankle-high black shoes and mismatched wool

stockings. The vaqueros laughed. Jonas laughed himself. It was pretty funny, all

right, seeing her on her back with her pins in the air.

“Fuh-fuh-five,” Deppa said, laughing so hard he was hiccupping. “Sih-sih-six!”

Rhea climbed back up, flopped onto the cant-board again with all the grace of a

dying fish, and peered around at them, wall-eyed and sneering.

“I curse ye all!” she screamed. It cut through them, stilling their laughter even as

the cart bounced toward the edge of the trampled clearing. “Every last one of ye!

Ye... and ye... and ye!” Her crooked finger pointed last at Jonas. “Thief! Miserable thief!”

As though it was yours, Jonas marvelled (although “Mine!” was the first word to

oc?cur to him, once he had tak?en pos?sion of it). As though such a won?der could ev?er be?long to a back?coun?try read?er of roost?er?guts such as you.

The cart bounced its way in?to the Bad Grass, the pony pulling hard with its ears

laid back; the old wom?an's screams served to drive it bet?ter than any whip could

have done. The black slipped in?to the green. They saw the cart flick?er like a

con?jur?er's trick, and then it was gone. For a long time yet, how?ev?er, they heard her

shriek?ing her curs?es, call?ing death down up?on them be?neath the De?mon Moon.

15

"Go on," Jonas told Clay Reynolds. "Take our Sun?beam back. And if you want to

stop on the way and make some use of her, why, be my guest." He glanced at

Su?sana as he said this, to see what ef?fect it might be hav?ing, but he was

dis?ap?point?ed—she looked dazed, as if the last blow Ren?frew had dealt her had

scram?bled her brains, at least tem?porar?ily. "Just make sure she gets to Coral at the

end of all the fun." "I will. Any mes?sage for sai Thorin?"

"Tell her to keep the wench some?place safe un?til she hears from me. And . . . why

don't you stay with her. Clay? Coral, I mean—come to?mor row, I don't think we'll

have to wor?ry about this 'un any?more, but Coral . . . ride with her to Ritzy when

she goes. Be her es?cort, like."

Reynolds nod?ded. Bet?ter and bet?ter. Seafront it would be, and that was fine. He

might like a lit?tle taste of the girl once he got her there, but not on the way. Not

un?der the ghost?ly?full day?time De?mon Moon. "Go on, then. Get start?ed."

Reynolds led her across the clear?ing, aim?ing for a point well away from the bent

swath of grass where Rhea had made her ex?it. Su?sana rode silent?ly, down?cast eyes

fixed on her bound wrists.

Jonas turned to face his men. "The three young fel?lows from

In-?World have

bro?ken their way out of jail, with that haughty young bitch's help," he said,

point?ing at Su?san's de?part?ing back.

There was a low, growl?ing mur?mur from the men. That "Will Dear born" and his

friends were free they had known; that sai Del?ga?do had helped them es?cape they

had not . . . and it was per?haps just as well for her that Reynolds was at that

mo?ment lead?ing her in?to the Bad Grass and out of sight.

"Nev?er mind!" Jonas shout?ed, pulling their at?ten?tion back to him. He reached out a

stealthy hand and ca?ressed the curve at the bot?tom of the draw?string bag. Just

touch?ing the ball made him feel as if he could do any?thing, and with one hand tied

be?hind his back, at that.

"Nev?er mind her, and nev?er mind them!" His eyes moved from Lengyll to Wert?ner

to Croy?don to Bri?an Hookey to Roy De?pape. "We're close to forty men, go?ing to

join an?oth?er hun?dred and fifty. They're three, and not one a day over six?teen. Are

you afraid of three lit?tle boys?"

"No!" they cried.

"If we run on em, my cul?lies, what will we do?"

"KILL THEM!" The shout so loud that it sent rooks ris?ing up in? to the morn?ing sun,

caw?ing their dis?plea?sure as they com?menced the hunt for more peace?ful

sur?round?ings.

Jonas was sat?is?fied. His hand was still on the sweet curve of the ball, and he could

feel it pour?ing strength in?to him. Pink strength, he thought, and grinned.

"Come on, boys. I want those tankers in the woods west of Eye? bolt be?fore the

home folks light their Reap-?Night Bon?fire."

16

Sheemie, crouched down in the grass and peer?ing in?to the clear?ing, was near?ly run

over by Rhea's black wag?on; the scream?ing, gib?ber?ing witch passed so close to

him that he could smell her sour skin and dirty hair. If she had

looked down, she

couldn't have missed seeing him and undoubtedly would have turned him in to a

bird or a bum-bler or maybe even a mosquito.

The boy saw Jonas pass custody of Susan to the one in the cloak, and began

working his way around the edge of the clearing. He heard Jonas hanging the

men (many of whom Sheemie knew; it shamed him to know how many Mejis

cowboys were doing that bad Coffin Hunter's bidding), but paid no attention to

what he was saying. Sheemie froze in place as they mounted up, momentarily

fearing they would come in his direction, but they rode the other way, west. The

clearing emptied almost as if by magic . . . except it wasn't empty.

Caprichoso had been left behind, his lead trailing on the beaten grass. Capi looked

after the departing riders, brayed once—as if to tell them they could all go to

hell—then turned and made eye-contact with Sheemie, who was peering out into

the clearing. The mule flicked his ears at the boy, then tried to graze. He lipped the

Bad Grass a single time, raised his head, and brayed at Sheemie, as if to say this

was all the inn-boy's fault.

Sheemie stared thoughtfully at Caprichoso, thinking of how much easier it was to

ride than to walk. Gods, yes ... but that second bray decided him against it. The

mule might give one of his disgusted cries at the wrong time and alert the man

who had Susan.

"You'll find your way home, I reckon," Sheemie said. "So long, pal. So long, good

old Capi. See you farther down the path."

He found the path made by Susan and Reynolds, and began to trot after them

once more.

17

"They're coming again," Alain said a moment before Roland sensed it himself—a

brief flicker in his head like pink lightening. "All of them."

Roland hun?kered in front of Cuth?bert. Cuth?bert looked back at him with?out even a

sug?ges?tion of his usu?al fool?ish good hu?mor.

"Much of it's on you," Roland said, then tapped the sling?shot. "And on that."

"I know."

"How much have you got in the ar?mory?"

"Al?most four dozen steel balls." Bert held up a cot?ton bag which had, in more

set?tled times, held his fa?ther's to?bac?co. "Plus as?sort?ed fire?works in my sad?dle?bag."

"How many big-?bangers?"

"Enough, Roland." Un?smil?ing. With the laugh?ter gone from them, he had the

hol?low eyes of just one more killer. "Enough."

Roland ran a hand down the front of the ser?ape he wore, letting his palm

reac?quaint it?self with the rough weave. He looked at Cuth?bert's, then at Alain's,

telling him?self again that it could work, yes, as long as they held their nerve and

didn't let them?selves think of it in terms of three against forty or fifty, it could

work.

"The ones out at Hang?ing Rock will hear the shoot?ing once it starts, won't they?"

Al asked.

Roland nod?ded. "With the wind blow?ing from us to them, there's no doubt of that."

"We'll have to move fast, then."

"We'll go as best we can." Roland thought of stand?ing be?tween the tan?gled green

hedges be?hind the Great Hall, David the hawk on his arm and a sweat of ter?ror

trick?ling down his back. I think you die to?day, he had told the hawk, and he had

told it true. Yet he him?self had lived, and passed his test, and walked out of the

test?ing cor?ri?dor fac?ing east. To?day it was Cuth?bert and Alain's turn to be

test?ed—not in Gilead, in the tra?di tion?al place of prov?ing be?hind the Great Hall,

but here in Mejis, on the edge of the Bad Grass, in the desert, and in the canyon.

Eye-bolt Canyon.

"Prove or die," Alain said, as if reading the run of the gun-slinger's thoughts.

"That's what it comes down to."

"Yes. That's what it always comes down to, in the end. How long before they get here, do you think?"

"An hour at least, I'd say. Likely two."

"They'll be running a 'watch-and-go.' "

Alain nodded. "I think so, yes."

"That's not good," Cuthbert said.

"Jonas is afraid of being ambushed in the grass," Roland said. "Maybe of us setting fire to it around him. They'll loosen up when they get in to the clear."

"You hope," Cuthbert said.

Roland nodded gravely. "Yes. I hope."

18

At first Reynolds was content to lead the girl along the broken back-trail at a fast

walk, but about thirty minutes after leaving Jonas, Lengyll, and the rest, he broke

in to a trot. Pylon matched Reynolds's horse easily, and just as easily when, ten

minutes later, he upped their speed to a light but steady run.

Susan held to the horn of her saddle with her bound hands and rode easily at

Reynolds's right, her hair streaming out behind her. She thought her face must be

quite colorful; the skin of her cheeks felt raised at least two inches higher than

usual, welled and tender. Even the passing wind stung a little.

At the place where the Bad Grass gave way to the Drop, Reynolds stopped to give

the horses a blow. He dismounted himself, turned his back to her, and took a piss.

As he did, Susan looked up along the rise of land and saw the great herd, now

untended and unravelling at the edges. They had done that much, perhaps. It

wasn't much, but it was something.

"Do you need to do the necessary?" Reynolds asked. "I'll help you down if you do,

but don't say no now and whine about it later."

“Ye’re afraid. Big brave reg’ula’tor that ye are, ye’re scared, ain’t ye? Aye, cof’fin tat’too and all.”

Reynolds tried a con’temp’tuous grin. It didn’t fit his face very well this morn’ing.

“You ort to leave the for’tune-telling to those that are good at it, mis’sy. Now do

you need a nec’es’sary stop or not?”

“No. And ye are afraid. Of what?”

Reynolds, who on’ly knew that his bad feel’ing hadn’t left him when he left Jonas,

as he’d hoped it would, bared his to’bac’co-stained teeth at her. “If you can’t talk

sen’si’ble, just shut up.”

“Why don’t ye let me go? Per’haps my friends will do the same for you, when they

catch us up.”

This time Reynolds grunt’ed laugh’ter which was al’most gen’uine. He swung

him’self in’to his sad’dle, hawked, spat. Over’head, De’mon Moon was a pale and

bloat’ed ball in the sky. “You can dream, miss’sai,” he said, “dream’ing’s free. But

you ain’t nev’er go’ing to see those three again. They’re for the worms, they are.

Now let’s ride.”

They rode.

19

Cordelia hadn’t gone to bed at all on Reap’ing Eve. She sat the night through in her

par’lor chair, and al’tough there was sewing on her lap, she had put not a sin’gle

stitch in nor picked one out. Now, as morn’ing’s light bright’ened to’ward ten o’ the

clock, she sat in the same chair, look’ing out at noth’ing. What was there to look at,

any’way? Ev’ery’ting had come down with a smash—all her hopes of the for’tune

Thorin would set’tle on Su’san and Su’san’s child, per’haps while he still lived,

cer’tain’ly in his dead-’let’ter; all her hopes of as’cend’ing to her prop’er place in the

com’mu ni’ty; all her plans for the fu’ture. Swept away by two wil’ful young peo’ple

who couldn’t keep their pants up.

She sat in her old chair with her knit?ing on her lap and the ash?es Su san had

smear?ed on her cheek stand?ing out like a brand, and thought:

They'll find me dead in this chair, some?day—old, poor, and for?got?ten. That

un?grate?ful child! Af?ter all I did for her!

What roused her was a weak scratch?ing at the win?dow. She had no idea how long

it had been go?ing on be?fore it fi?nal?ly in?trud?ed on her conscious?ness, but when it

did, she laid her needle?work aside and got up to see. A bird, per?haps. Or chil?dren

play?ing Reap?ing jokes, un?aware that the world had come to an end. What?ev?er it

was, she would shoo it away.

Cordelia saw noth?ing at first. Then, as she was about to turn away, she spied a

pony and cart at the edge of the yard. The cart was a lit?tle disqui?et?ing—black,

with gold sym?bols over?paint?ed—and the pony in the shafts stood with its head

low?ered, not graz?ing, look?ing as if it had been run half to death.

She was still frown?ing out at this when a twist?ed, filthy hand rose in the air

di?rect?ly in front of her and be?gan to scratch at the glass again. Cordelia gasped and

clapped both hands to her bo?som as her heart took a star?tled leap in her chest. She

backed up a step, and gave a lit?tle shriek as her calf brushed the ten?der of the

stove.

The long, dirty nails scratched twice more, then fell away.

Cordelia stood where she was for a mo?ment, ir?res?olute, then went to the door,

stop?ping at the wood?box to pick up a chunk of ash which fit?ted her hand. Just in

case. Then she jerked the door open, went to the com?er of the house, drew in a

deep, steady?ing breath, and went around to the gar?den side, rais?ing the ash-?chunk

as she did.

“Get out, who?ev?er ye are! Scat be?fore I—”

Her voice was stilled by what she saw: an in?cred?ibly old wom?an crawl?ing through

the frost-killed flowerbed next to the house—crawl?ing to? ward her. The crone's

stringy white hair (what re?mained of it) hung in her face. Sores fes?tered on her

cheeks and brow; her lips had split and driz?zled blood down her point?ed, warty

chin. The corneas of her eyes had gone a filthy gray-?yel?low, and she pant?ed like a

cracked bel?lows as she moved.

“Good wom?an, help me,” this specter gasped. “Help me if ye will, for I’m about

done up.”

The hand hold?ing the chunk of ash sagged. Cordelia could hard?ly be lieve what

she was see?ing. “Rhea?” she whis?pered. “Is it Rhea?”

“Aye,” Rhea whis?pered, crawl?ing re?lent?less?ly through the dead silk-?flow?ers,

drag?ging her hands through the cold earth. “Help me.”

Cordelia re?treat?ed a step, her makeshift blud?geon now hang?ing at her knee. “No,

I... I can’t have such as thee in my house ... I’m sor?ry to see ye so, but . . . but I

have a rep?uta?tion, ye ken . . . folk watch me close, so they do ...”

She glanced at the High Street as she said this, as if ex?pect?ing to see a line of

towns?peo?ple out?side her gate, watch?ing ea?ger?ly, avid to fleet their wretched gos?sip

on its ly?ing way, but there was no one there. Ham?bry was qui?et, its walks and

by?ways emp?ty, the cus?tom?ary joy?ous noise of Reap ing Fair-?Day stilled. She

looked back at the thing which had fetched up in her dead flow?ers.

“Yer niece ... did this . . .” the thing in the dirt whis?pered. “All . . . her fault . . .”

Cordelia dropped the chunk of wood. It clipped the side of her an?kle, but she

hard?ly no?ticed. Her hands curled in?to fists be?fore her.

“Help me,” Rhea whis?pered. “I know ... where she is ... we ... we have work, us

two ... wom?en’s . . . work ...”

Cordelia hes?itat?ed a mo?ment, then went to the wom?an, knelt, got an arm around

her, and some?how got her to her feet. The smell com?ing off

her was reeky and

nau?se?at?ing—the smell of de?com?pos?ing flesh.

Bony fin?gers ca?ressed Cordelia's cheek and the side of her neck as she helped the

hag in?to the house. Cordelia's flesh crawled, but she didn't pull away un?til Rhea

col?lapsed in?to a chair, gasp?ing from one end and fart?ing from the oth?er.

“Lis?ten to me,” the old wom?an hissed.

“I am.” Cordelia drew a chair over and sat be?side her. At death's door she might

be, but once her eye fell on you, it was strange?ly hard to look away. Now Rhea's

fin?gers dipped in?side the bodice of her dirty dress, brought out a sil?ver charm of

some kind, and be?gan to move it back and forth rapid?ly, as if telling beads.

Cordelia, who hadn't felt sleepy all night, be?gan to feel that way now.

“The oth?ers are be?yond us,” Rhea said, “and the ball has slipped my grasp. But

she—! Back to May?or's House she's been ta'en, and may?hap we could see to

her—we could do that much, aye.”

“You can't see to any?thing,” Cordelia said dis?tant?ly. “You're dy?ing.”

Rhea wheezed laugh?ter and a trick?le of yel?low?ish drool. “Dy?ing? Nay! Just done

up and in need of a re?fresh?ment. Now lis?ten to me, Cordelia daugh?ter of Hi?ram

and sis?ter of Pat!”

She hooked a bony (and sur?pris?ing?ly strong) arm around Cordelia's neck and drew

her close. At the same time she raised her oth?er hand, twirling the sil?ver medal?lion

in front of Cordelia's wide eyes. The crone whis?pered, and af?ter a bit Cordelia

be?gan to nod her un?der?stand?ing.

“Do it, then,” the old wom?an said, let?ting go. She slumped back in her chair,

ex?haust?ed. “Now, for I can't last much longer as I am. And I'll need a bit o' time

af?ter, mind ye. To re?vive, like.”

Cordelia moved across the room to the kitchen area. There, on the counter be?side

the hand-?pump, was a wood-en block in which were sheathed the two sharp knives

of the house. She took one and came back. Her eyes were distant and far, as

Su-san's had been when she and Rhea stood in the open doorway of Rhea's hut in

the light of the Kiss-ing Moon.

"Would ye pay her back?" Rhea asked. "For that's why I've come to ye."

"Miss Oh So Young and Pret-ty," Cordelia murmured in a barely audible voice.

The hand not holding the knife floated up to her face and touched her ash-smeared

cheek. "Yes. I'd be repaid of her, so I would."

"To the death?"

"Aye. Hers or mine."

"'Twill be hers," Rhea said, "never fear it. Now refresh me, Cordelia. Give me

what I need!"

Cordelia unbuttoned her dress down the front, pushing it open to reveal an

ungenerous bosom and a middle which had begun to curve out in the last year or

so, making a tidy little pot-belly. Yet she still had the vestige of a waist, and it was

here she used the knife, cutting through her shift and the top layers of flesh

beneath. The white cotton began to bloom red at once along the slit.

"Aye," Rhea whispered. "Like roses. I dream of them often enough, roses in

bloom, and what stands black among em at the end of the world. Come closer!"

She put her hand on the small of Cordelia's back, urging her forward. She raised

her eyes to Cordelia's face, then grinned and licked her lips. "Good. Good

enough."

Cordelia looked blankly over the top of the old woman's head as Rhea of the Coos

buried her face against the red cut in the shift and began to drink.

20

Roland was at first pleased as the muted jingle of harness and buckle drew closer

to the place where the three of them were hun?kered down in the high grass, but as

the sounds drew clos?er still—close enough to hear mur mur?ing voic?es as well as

soft-?thud?ding hooves—he be?gan to be afraid. For the rid?ers to pass close was one

thing, but if they were, through foul luck, to come right up?on them, the three boys

would like?ly die like a nest of moles un?cov?ered by the blade of a pass?ing plow.

Ka sure?ly hadn't brought them all this way to end in such fash?ion, had it? In all

these miles of Bad Grass, how could that par?ty of on?com?ing rid ers pos?si?bly strike

the one point where Roland and his friends had pulled up? But still they closed in,

the sound of tack and buck?le and men's voic?es grow?ing ev?er sharp?er.

Alain looked at Roland with dis?mayed eyes and point?ed to the left. Roland shook

his head and pat?ted his hands to?ward the ground, in?di?cat?ing they would stay put.

They had to stay put; it was too late to move with?out be?ing heard.

Roland drew his guns.

Cuth?bert and Alain did the same.

In the end, the plow missed the moles by six?ty feet. The boys could ac?tu?al?ly see

the hors?es and rid?ers flash?ing through the thick grass; Roland eas?ily made out that

the par?ty was led by Jonas, De?pape, and Lengyll, rid ing three abreast. They were

fol?lowed by at least three dozen oth?ers, glimpsed as roan flash?es and the bright red

and green of ser?apes through the grass. They were strung out pret?ty well, and

Roland thought he and his friends could rea?son?ably hope they'd string out even

more once they reached open desert.

The boys wait?ed for the par?ty to pass, hold?ing their hors?es' heads in case one of

them took it in mind to whick?er a greet?ing to the nags so close by. When they

were gone, Roland turned his pale and un?smil?ing face to his friends.

“Mount up,” he said. “Reap’ing’s come.”

21

They walked their hors’es to the edge of the Bad Grass, meet’
ing the path of Jonas’s
par’ty where the grass gave way first to a zone of stunt’ed
bush’es and then to the
desert it’self.

The wind howled high and lone’some, car’ry’ing big drifts of
grit’ty dust un’der a
cloud’less dark blue sky. De’moon Moon stared down from it like
the filmed eye of a

corpse. Two hun’dred yards ahead, the drogue rid’ers back’ing
Jonas’s par’ty were
spread out in a line of three, their som’breros jammed down
tight on their heads,
their shoul’ders hunched, their scrapes blow’ing.

Roland moved so that Cuth’bert rode in the mid’dle of their
trio. Bert had his
sling’shot in his hand. Now he hand’ed Alain half a dozen steel
balls, and Roland

an’oth’er half-’dozen. Then he raised his eye’brows ques’tion’
ing’ly. Roland nod’ded
and they be’gan to ride.

Dust blew past them in rat’tling sheets, some’times turn’ing the
drogue rid’ers in’to
ghosts, some’times ob’scur’ing them com’plete’ly, but the boys
closed in steady’ly.

Roland rode tense, wait’ing for one of the drogues to turn in his
sad’dle and see

them, but none did—none of them want’ed to put his face in’to
that cut’ting, grit-

filled wind. Nor was there sound to warn them; there was sandy
hard’pack un’der
the hors’es’ hooves now, and it didn’t give away much.

When they were just twen’ty yards be’hind the drogues, Cuth’
bert nod’ded—they

were close enough for him to work. Alain hand’ed him a ball.
Bert, sit’ting ram’rod

straight in the sad’dle, dropped it in’to the cup of his sling’
shot, pulled, wait’ed for

the wind to drop, then re’leased. The rid’er ahead on the left
jerked as if stung,

raised one hand a lit’tle, then top’pled out of his sad’dle. In’
cred’ibly, nei’ther of his

two com’paneros seemed to no tice. Roland saw what he

thought was the

beginning of a reaction from the one on the right when Bert drew again, and the

riders in the middle collapsed forward on to his horse's neck. The horse, startled,

reared up. The rider flopped bonelessly backward, his sombrero tumbling off, and

fell. The wind dropped enough for Roland to hear his knee snap as his foot caught

in one of his stirrups.

The third rider now began to turn. Roland caught a glimpse of a bearded face—a

dan gling cigarette, unlit because of the wind, one astonished eye—and then

Cuthbert's sling thumped again. The astonished eye was replaced by a red socket.

The rider slid from his saddle, groping for the horn and missing it.

Three gone, Roland thought.

He kicked Rusher in to a gallop. The others did the same, and the boys rode

forward in to the dust a stirrup's width apart. The horses of the arm bushed drogue

riders veered off to the south in a group, and that was good. Riderless horses

or didn't raise eyebrows in Mejis, but when they were saddled—

More riders up ahead: a single, then two side by side, then another single.

Roland drew his knife, and rode up beside the fellow who was now drogue and

didn't know it.

"What news?" he asked conversationally, and when the man turned, Roland buried

his knife in his chest. The vaq's brown eyes widened above the bandanna he'd

pulled up outlaw-style over his mouth and nose, and then he tumbled from his

saddle.

Cuthbert and Alain spurred past him, and Bert, not slowing, took the two riding

ahead with his slingshot. The fellow beyond them heard something in spite of the

wind, and swivelled in his saddle. Alain had drawn his own knife and now held it

by the tip of the blade. He threw hard, in the ex?ag?ger?at?ed full-arm motion they had

been taught, and although the range was long for such work—twenty feet at least,

and in windy air—his aim was true. The hilt came to rest protruding from the

center of the man's bandanna. The vaq groped for it, making choked gurgling

sounds around the knife in his throat, and then he too dropped from the saddle.

Seven now.

Like the story of the shoe-maker and the flies, Roland thought. His heart was

beating slow and hard in his chest as he caught up with Alain and Cuthbert. The

wind gusted a lonely whine. Dust flew, swirled, then dropped with the wind.

Ahead of them were three more riders, and ahead of them the main party.

Roland pointed at the next three, then mimed the sling-shot. Pointed beyond them

and mimed firing a revolver. Cuthbert and Alain nodded. They rode forward, once

again stirrup-to-stirrup, closing in.

22

Bert got two of the three ahead of them clean, but the third jerked at the wrong

moment, and the steel ball meant for the back of his head only clipped his earlobe

on the way by. Roland had drawn his gun by then, however, and put a bullet in the

man's temple as he turned. That made ten, a full quarter of Jonas's company before

the riders even realized trouble had begun. Roland had no idea if it would be

enough of an advance, but he knew that the first part of the job was done. No

more stealth; now it was a matter of raw killing.

"Hile! Hile!" he screamed in a ringing, carrying voice. "To me, gunslingers! To

me! Ride them down! No prisoners!"

They spurred toward the main party, riding in to battle for the first time, closing

like wolves on sheep, shooting before the men ahead of them had any slight idea

of who had got ten in behind them or what was happening.
The three boys had
been trained as gun-slingers, and what they lacked in experience they made up for
with the keen eyes and reflexes of the young. Under their guns, the desert east of
Hanging Rock became a killing-floor.
Screaming, not a single thought among them above the wrists of their dead
hands, they sliced into the unprepared Mejis party like a three-sided blade,
shooting as they went. Not every shot killed, but not a one went entirely wild,
either. Men flew out of their saddles and were dragged by boots caught in stirrups
as their horses bolted; other men, some dead, some only wounded, were trampled
beneath the feet of their panicky, rearing mounts.
Roland rode with both guns drawn and tiring, Rusher's reins gripped in his teeth so
they wouldn't fall overboard and trip the horse up. Two men dropped beneath his
fire on his left, two more on the right. Ahead of them, Brian Hookey turned in his
saddle, his beard-stubby face long with amazement. Around his neck, a reaper
charm in the shape of a bell swung and tinkled as he grabbed for the shotgun
which hung in a scabbard over one burly blacksmith's shoulder. Before he could
do more than get a hand on the gunstock, Roland blew the silver bell off his chest
and exploded the heart which lay beneath it. Hookey pitched out of his saddle with
a grunt.
Cuthbert caught up with Roland on the right side and shot two more men off their
horses. He gave Roland a fierce and blazing grin. "Al was right!" he shouted.
"These are hard calibers!"
Roland's talented fingers did their work, rolling the cylinders of the guns he held
and reloading at a full gallop—doing it with a ghastly, super natural speed—and
then beginning to fire again. Now they had come almost all

the way through the

group, riding hard, laying men low on both sides and straight ahead as well. Alain

dropped back a little and turned his horse, covering Roland and Cuthbert from

behind.

Roland saw Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll rein around to face their attackers.

Lengyll was clawing at his machine-gun, but the strap had got tangled in the

wide collar of the duster he wore, and every time he grabbed for the stock, it

bobbed out of his reach. Beneath his heavy gray-blond mustache, Lengyll's mouth

was twisted with fury.

Now, riding between Roland and Cuthbert and these three, holding a huge blue-

steel five-shot in one hand, came Hash Renfrew.

"Gods damn you!" Renfrew cried. "Oh, you rotten sister-fuckers!" He dropped his

reins and laid the five-shot in the crook of one elbow to steady it. The wind gusted

viciously, wrapping him in an enveloping swirl of swirling brown grit.

Roland had no thought of retreating, or perhaps jiggling to one side or the other. He

had, in fact, no thoughts at all. The fever had descended over his mind and he

burned with it like a torch inside a glass sleeve. Screaming through the reins

caught in his teeth, he galloped toward Hash Renfrew and the three men behind

him.

23

Jonas had no clear idea of what was happening until he heard Will Dear born

screaming

(Hile! To me! No prisoners!)

a battle-cry he knew of old. Then it fell into place and the rattling of gunfire made

sense. He reined around, aware of Roy doing the same beside him . . . but most

aware of the ball in its bag, a thing both powerful and fragile, swinging back and

forth against the neck of his horse.

"It's those kids!" Roy exclaimed. His total surprise made him look more stupid than ever.

"Dearborn, you bastard!" Hash Renfrew spat, and the gun in his hand thundered a sin-gle time.

Jonas saw Dearborn's sombrero rise from his head, its brim chewed away. Then

the kid was firing, and he was good—better than anyone Jonas had ever seen in

his life. Renfrew was hampered back out of his saddle with both legs kicking, still

holding on to his monster gun, firing it twice at the dusty-blue sky before hitting

the ground on his back and rolling, dead, on his side.

Lengyll's hand dropped away from the elusive wire stock of his speed-shooter and

he only stared, unable to believe the apparition bearing down on him out of the

dust. "Get back!" he cried. "In the name of the Horsemen's Association, I tell

you—" Then a large black hole appeared in the center of his forehead, just above

the place where his eyebrows tangled together. His hands flew up to his shoulders,

palms out, as if he were declaring surrender. That was how he died.

"Son of a bitch, oh you little sister-fucking son of a bitch!" De-pape howled. He

tried to draw and his revolver got caught in his scrape. He was still trying to pull it

free when a bullet from Roland's gun opened his mouth in a red scream almost all

the way down to his Adam's apple.

This can't be happening, Jonas thought stupidly. It can't, there are too many of us.

But it was happening. The In-World boys had struck unerringly at the fracture-

line; were performing what amounted to a textbook example of how gun-slingers

were supposed to attack when the odds were bad. And Jonas's coalition of

ranchers, cowboys, and town tough-boys had shattered. Those not dead were

fleeing to every point of the compass, spurring their horses

as if a hun?dred dev?ils

paroled from hell were in pur?suit. They were far from a hun?dred, but they fought

like a hun?dred. Bod?ies were scat?tered in the dust ev?ery?where, and as Jonas

watched, he saw the one serv?ing as their back door—Stock?worth—ride down

an?oth?er man, bump him out of his sad?dle, and put a bul?let in his head as he fell.

Gods of the earth, he thought, that was Croy?don, him that owns the Pi?ano Ranch!

Ex?cept he didn't own it any?more.

And now Dear?born was bear?ing down on Jonas with his gun drawn.

Jonas snatched the draw?string looped around the horn of his sad?dle and un?wound

it with two fast, hard snaps of the wrist. He held the bag up in the windy air, his

teeth bared and his long white hair stream?ing.

“Come any clos?er and I'll smash it! I mean it, you damned pup?py! Stay where you are!”

Roland nev?er hes?itat?ed in his head?long gal?lop, nev?er paused to think; his hands did

his think?ing for him now, and when he re?mem?bered all this lat?er, it was dis?tant and

silent and queer?ly warped, like some?thing seen in a flawed mir?ror ... or a wiz?ard's glass.

Jonas thought: Gods, it's him! It's Arthur Eld him?self come to take me!

And as the bar?rel of Roland's gun opened in his eye like the en?trance to a tun?nel or

a mi?ne?shaft, Jonas re?mem?bered what the brat had said to him in the dusty

door?yard of that burned-?out ranch: The soul of a man such as you can nev?er leave the west.

I knew, Jonas thought. Even then I knew my ka had pret?ty well run out. But sure?ly

he won't risk the ball . . . he can't risk the ball, he's the dinh of this ka-?tet and he can't risk it...

“To me!” Jonas screamed. “To me, boys! They're on?ly three, for gods' sake! To me,

you cow?ards!"

But he was alone—Lengyll killed with his id?iot?ic ma?chine?
gun ly?ing by his side,

Roy a corpse glar?ing up at the bit?ter sky, Quint fled, Hookey
dead, the ranch?ers

who had rid?den with them gone. On?ly Clay still lived, and he
was miles from here.

"I'll smash it!" he shrieked at the cold-?eyed boy bear?ing down
on him like death's

sleek?est en?gine. "Be?fore all the gods, I'll—"

Roland thumbed back the ham?mer of his re?volver and fired.
The bul let struck the

cen?ter of the tat?tooed hand hold?ing the draw?string cord and
va?por?ized the palm,

leav?ing on?ly fin?gers that twitched their ran?dom way out of a
spongy red mass. For

just a mo?ment Roland saw the blue cof?fin, and then it was
cov?ered by

down?spilling blood.

The bag dropped. And, as Rush?er col?lid?ed with Jonas's horse
and slewed it to the

side. Roland caught the bag deft?ly in the crook of one arm.
Jonas, scream?ing in

dis?may as the prize left him, grabbed at Roland, caught his
shoul?der, and al?most

suc?ceed?ed in turn?ing the gun?slinger out of his sad?dle.
Jonas's blood rained across

Roland's face in hot drops.

"Give it back, you brat!" Jonas clawed un?der his ser?ape and
brought out an?oth?er

gun. "Give it back, it's mine!"

"Not any?more," Roland said. And, as Rush?er danced around,
quick and del?icate

for such a large an?imal, Roland fired two point-?blank rounds
in?to Jonas's face.

Jonas's horse bolt?ed out from un?der him and the man with the
white hair land?ed

spread?ea?gled on his back with a thump. His arms and legs
spasmed, jerked,

trem?bled, then stilled.

Roland looped the bag's draw?string over his shoul?der and rode
back to?ward Alain

and Cuth?bert, ready to give aid ... but there was no need. They
sat their hors?es side

by side in the blow?ing dust, at the end of a scat tered road of

dead bod?ies, their

eyes wide and dazed—eyes of boys who have passed through fire for the first time

and can hard?ly be?lieve they have not been burned. On?ly Alain had been wound?ed;

a bul?let had opened his left cheek, a wound that healed clean but left a scar he bore

un?til his dy?ing day. He could not re?mem?ber who had shot him, he said lat?er on, or

at what point of the bat?tle. He had been lost to him?self dur?ing the shoot ing, and

had on?ly vague mem?ories of what had hap?pened af?ter the charge be?gan. Cuth?bert

said much the same.

“Roland,” Cuth?bert said now. He passed a shaky hand down his face. “Hile,

gun?slinger.”

“Hile.”

Cuth?bert’s eyes were red and ir?ri?tat?ed from the sand, as if he had been cry?ing. He

took back the un?spent sil?ver sling?shot balls when Roland hand?ed them to him

with?out seem?ing to know what they were. “Roland, we’re alive.”

“Yes.”

Alain was look?ing around dazed?ly. “Where did the oth?ers go?”

“I’d say at least twen?ty-?five of them are back there,” Roland said, ges tur?ing at the

road of dead bod?ies. “The rest—” He waved his hand, still with a re?volver in it, in

a wide half-?cir?cle. “They’ve gone. Had their fill of Mid-?World’s wars, I wot.”

Roland slipped the draw?string bag off his shoul?der, held it be?fore him on the

bridge of his sad?dle for a mo?ment, and then opened it. For a mo?ment the bag’s

mouth was black, and then it filled with the ir?reg?ular pulse of a love?ly pink light.

It crept up the gun?slinger’s smooth cheeks like fin?gers and swam in his eyes.

“Roland,” Cuth?bert said, sud?den?ly ner?vous, “I don’t think you should play with

that. Es?pe?cial?ly not now. They’ll have heard the shoot?ing out at Hang?ing Rock. If

we're go'ing to fin'ish what we start'ed, we don't have time for

—“

Roland ig'nored him. He slipped both hands in'to the bag and lift'ed the wiz'ard's

glass out. He held it up to his eyes, un'aware that he had smeared it with droplets of

Jonas's blood. The ball did not mind; this was not the first time it had been blood-

touched. It flashed and swirled form'less'ly for a mo'ment, and then its pink va'pors

opened like cur'tains. Roland saw what was there, and lost him'self with'in it.

CHAP'TER X

BE'NEATH THE

DE'MON MOON (II)

1

Coral's grip on Su'san's arm was firm but not painful. There was noth'ing

par'ticular'ly cru'el about the way she was mov'ing Su'san along the down stairs

cor'ri'dor, but there was a re'lent'less'ness about it that was dis'heart'en ing. Su'san

didn't try to protest; it would have been use'less. Be'hind the two wom'en were a

pair of va'que'ros (armed with knives and bo'las rather than guns; the avail'able guns

had all gone west with Jonas). Be'hind the vaqs, skulk'ing along like a sullen ghost

which lacks the nec'es'sary psy'chic en'er'gy to ful'ly ma'te'ri'al'ize it'self, came the late

Chan'cel'lor's old'er broth'er, Laslo. Reynolds, his taste for a spot of jour'ney's-'end

rape blunt'ed by his grow'ing sense of dis'qui'et, had ei'ther re'mained above or gone

off to town.

“I'm go'ing to put ye in the cold pantry un'til I know bet'ter what to do with'ee,

dear,” Coral said. “Ye'll be quite safe there ... and warm. How for'tu'nate ye wore a

ser'ape. Then . . . when Jonas gets back ...”

“Ye'll nev'er see sai Jonas again,” Su'san said. “He won't ev'er

—”

Fresh pain ex'plod'ed in her sen'si'tive face. For a mo'ment it seemed the en'tire world

had blown up. Su'san reeled back against the dressed stone wall

of the low?er

cor?ri?dor, her vi?sion first blurred, then slow?ly clear?ing. She could feel blood

flow?ing down her cheek from a wound opened by the stone in Coral's ring when

Coral had back?hand?ed her. And her nose. That cussed thing was bleed?ing again,

too.

Coral was look?ing at her in a chilly this-?is-?all-?busi?ness-?to-?me fash?ion, but Su?san

be?lieved she saw some?thing dif?fer?ent in the wom?an's eyes. Fear, may?hap.

"Don't talk to me about El?dred, mis?sy. He's sent to catch the boys who killed my

broth?er. The boys you set loose."

"Get off it." Su?san wiped her nose, gri?maced at the blood pooled in her palm, and

wiped it on the leg of her pants. "I know who killed Hart as well as ye do yer?self,

so don't pull mine and I won't yank yer own." She watched Coral's hand rise, ready

to slap, and man?aged a dry laugh. "Go on. Cut my face open on the oth?er side, if

ye like. Will that change how ye sleep tonight with no man to warm the oth?er side

of the bed?"

Coral's hand came down fast and hard, but in?stead of slap?ping, it seized Su?san's

arm again. Hard enough to hurt, this time, but Su?san bare?ly felt it. She had been

hurt by ex?perts this day, and would suf?fer more hurt glad?ly, if that would has?ten

the mo?ment when she and Roland could be to?geth?er again.

Coral hauled her the rest of the way down the cor?ri?dor, through the kitchen (that

great room, which would have been all steam and bus?tle on any oth?er Reap?ing

Day, now stood un?can?ni?ly de?sert?ed), and to the iron-?bound door on the far side.

This she opened. A smell of pota?toes and gourds and sharp?root drift?ed out.

"Get in there. Go smart, be?fore I de?cide to kick yer win?some ass square."

Su?san looked her in the eye, smil?ing.

"I'd damn ye for a mur?der?er's bed-?bitch, sai Thorin, but ye've

al?ready damned

yer?self. Ye know it, too—’tis writ?ten in yer face, to be sure. So I’ll just drop ye a

curt?sey”—still smil?ing, she suit?ed ac?tion to the words—
“and wish ye a very good
day.”

“Get in and shut up yer saucy mouth!” Coral cried, and pushed Su?san in?to the cold

pantry. She slammed the door, ran the bolt, and turned her blaz?ing eyes up?on the

vaqs, who stood pru?dent?ly away from her.

“Keep her well, mucha?chos. Mind ye do.”

She brushed be?tween them, not lis?ten?ing to their as?sur?ances, and went up to her

late broth?er’s suite to wait for Jonas, or word of Jonas. The whey-?faced bitch

sit?ting down there amongst the car?rots and pota?toes knew noth?ing, but her words

(ye’ll nev?er see sai Jonas again)

were in Coral’s head now; they echoed and would not leave.

2

Twelve o’ the clock sound?ed from the squat bell-?tow?er atop the Town Gath?er?ing

Hall. And if the un?ac?cus?tomed si?lence which hung over the rest of Ham?bry

seemed strange as that Reap morn?ing passed in?to af?ter?noon, the si?lence in the

Trav?ellers’ Rest was down?right eerie. Bet?ter than two hundred souls were packed

to?geth?er be?neath the dead gaze of The Romp,, all of them drink?ing hard, yet there

was hard?ly a sound among them save for the shuf?fle of feet and the im?pa?tient rap

of glass?es on the bar, in?di?cat ing that an?oth?er drink was want?ed.

Sheb had tried a hes?itant tune on the pi?ano—“Big Bot?tle Boo?gie,” ev?ery?one liked

that one—and a cow?boy with a mu?tie-?mark on one cheek had put the tip of a knife

in his ear and told him to shut up that noise if he want?ed to keep what passed for

his brains on the star?board side of his eardrum. Sheb, who would be hap?py to go

on draw?ing breath for an?oth?er thou?sand years if the gods so al?lowed, quit his pi?ano-

bench at once, and went to the bar to help Stan?ley and Pet?tie
the Trot?ter serve up
the booze.

The mood of the drinkers was con?fused and sullen. Reap?ing
Fair had been stolen

from them, and they didn't know what to do about it. There
would still be a

bon?fire, and plen?ty of stuffy-?guys to bum on it, but there
were no Reap-?kiss?es

to?day and would be no danc?ing tonight; no rid?dles, no races,
no pig-?wres?tle, no

jokes ... no good cheer, dammit! No hearty farewell to the end
of the year! In?stead

of jovi?al?ity there had been mur?der in the dark, and the es?
cape of the guilty, and

now on?ly the hope of re?tribu tion in?stead of the cer?tain?ty
of it. These folk, sullen-

drunk and as poten tial?ly dan?ger?ous as storm?clouds filled
with light?ning, want?ed

some?one to fo?cus on, some?one to tell them what to do.

And, of course, some?one to toss on the fire, as in the days of
Eld.

It was at this point, not long af?ter the last toll of noon had fad?
ed in?to the cold air,

that the batwing doors opened and two wom?en came in. A
good many knew the

crone in the lead, and sev?er?al of them crossed their eyes with
their thumbs as a

ward against her evil look. A mur?mur ran through the room. It
was the Coos, the

old witch-?wom?an, and al?though her face was pocked with
sores and her eyes sunk

so deep in their sock?ets they could bare?ly be seen, she gave off
a pe?cu?liar sense of

vi?tal?ity. Her lips were red, as if she had been eat?ing win?ter?
ber?ries.

The wom?an be?hind her walked slow?ly and stiffly, with one
hand pressed against

her mid?sec?tion. Her face was as white as the witch-?wom?an's
mouth was red.

Rhea ad?vanced to the mid?dle of the floor, pass?ing the gawk?
ing trail-?hands at the

Watch Me ta?bles with?out so much as a glance. When she
reached the cen?ter of the

bar and stood di?rect?ly be?neath The Romp's glare, she turned

to look at the silent

drovers and townsfolk.

"Most of ye know me!" she cried in a rusty voice which stopped just short of

stri?den?cy. "Those of ye who don't have nev?er want?ed a love-po?tion or need?ed the

ram put back in yer rod or got?ten tired of a nag?ging moth?er-in-law's tongue. I'm

Rhea, the wise-wom?an of the Coos, and this la?dy be?side me is aunt to the girl who

freed three mur?der?ers last night... this same girl who murdered yer town's Sher?iff

and a good young man— mar?ried, he was, and with a kid on the way. He stood

be?fore her with 'is de?fense?less hands raised, pleadin for his life on be?half of his

wife and his bab?by to come, and still she shot 'im! Cru?el, she is! Cru?el and

heart?less!"

A mut?ter ran through the crowd. Rhea raised her twist?ed old claws and it stilled at

once. She turned in a slow cir?cle to see them all, hands still raised, look?ing like the

world's old?est, ugli?est prize?fight?er.

"Strangers came and ye wel?comed em in!" she cried in her rusty crow's voice.

"Wel?comed em and gave em bread to eat, and it's ru?in they've fed ye in re?turn!

The deaths of those ye loved and de?pend?ed on, spoilage to the time of the har?vest,

and gods know what curs?es up?on the time to fol?low fin de ano!"

More mur?murs, now loud?er. She had touched their deep?est fear: that this year's

evil would spread, might even snarl the new?ly thread?ed stock which had so slow?ly

and hope?ful?ly be?gun to emerge along the Out?er Arc.

"But they've gone and like?ly won't be back!" Rhea con?tin?ued. "May?hap just as

well—why should their strange blood taint our ground? But there's this oth?er... one

raised among us ... a young wom?an gone traitor to her town and rogue among her

own kind."

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whis?per on this last phrase; her

lis?ten ers strained

for?ward to hear, faces grim, eyes big. And now Rhea pulled the pal?lid, skin?ny

wom?an in the rusty black dress for?ward. She stood Cordelia in front oth?er like a

doll or a ven?tril?oquist's dum?my, and whis pered in her ear ... but the whis?per

trav?elled, some?how; they all heard it.

"Come, dear. Tell em what ye told me."

In a dead, car?ry?ing voice, Cordelia said: "She said she wouldn't be the May?or's

gilly. He wasn't good enough for such as her, she said. And then she se?duced Will

Dear?born. The price of her body was a fine po?si?tion in Gilead as his con?sort . . .

and the mur?der of Hart Thorin. Dear?born paid her price. Lusty as he was for her,

he paid glad?ly. His friends helped; they may have had the use of 'er as well, for all

I know. Chan?cel?lor Rimer must have got?ten in their way. Or p'rhaps they just saw

him, and felt like do?ing him, too."

"Bas?tards!" Pet?tie cried. "Sneak?ing young culls!"

"Now tell cm what's need?ed to clar?ify the new sea?son be?fore it's sp'iled, dearie,"

Rhea said in a croon?ing voice.

Cordelia Del?ga?do raised her head and looked around at the men. She took a breath,

pulling the sour, in?ter?min?gled smells of gray and beer and smoke and whiskey

deep in?to her spin?ster's lungs.

"Take her. Ye must take her. I say it in love and sor?row, so I do."

Silent. Their eyes.

"Paint her hands."

The glass gaze of the thing on the wall, look?ing its stuffed judg?ment over the

wait?ing room.

"Chary?ou tree, " Cordelia whis?pered.

They did not cry their agree?ment but sighed it, like au?tumn wind through stripped trees.

3

Sheemie ran af?ter the bad Cof?fin Hunter and Su?san??sai un?til he could lit er?al?ly run

no more—his lungs were afire and the stitch which had formed in his side turned

in to a cramp. He pitched forward on to the grass of the Drop, his left hand

clutching his right armpit, gripping with pain.

He lay there for some time with his face deep in the fragrant grass, knowing they

were getting farther and farther ahead but also knowing it would do him no good

to get up and start running again until the stitch was good and gone. If he tried to

hurry the process, the stitch would simply come back and lay him low again. So

he lay where he was, lifting his head to look at the tracks left by Susan-sai and the

bad Cof-fin Hunter, and he was just about ready to try his feet when Capi-choso bit

him. Not a nip, mind you, but a good healthy chomp. Capi had had a difficult

twenty-four hours, and he hadn't much liked to see the author of all his misery

lying on the grass, apparently taking a nap.

"Yeee-OWWWW-by-damn!" Sheemie cried, and rocked to his feet. There was

nothing so magical as a good bite on the ass, a man of more philosophical bent

might have reflected; it made all other concerns, no matter how heavy or

sorrowful, disappear like smoke.

He whirled about. "Why did you do that, you mean old sneak of a Capi?" Sheemie

was rubbing his bottom vigorously, and large tears of pain stood out in his eyes.

"That hurts like . . . like a big old sonovabitch!"

Capi-choso extended his neck to its maximum length, bared his teeth in the satisfying

grin which only mules and dromedaries can command, and brayed. To Sheemie

that bray sounded very like laughter.

The mule's lead still trailed back between his sharp little hoofs. Sheemie reached

for it, and when Capi dipped his head to inflict another bite, the boy gave him a

good hard whack across the side of his narrow head. Capi snorted and blinked.

"You had that coming, mean old Capi," Sheemie said. "I'll have to shit from a

squat for a week, so I will. Won't be able to sit on the damned jakes." He doubled

the lead over his fist and climbed aboard the mule. Capi made no attempt to buck

him off, but Sheemie winced as his wounded part settled atop the ridge of the

mule's spine. This was good luck just the same, though, he thought as he kicked

the animal into motion. His ass hurt, but at least he wouldn't have to walk ... or try

to run with a stitch in his side.

"Go on, stupid!" he said. "Hurry up! Fast as you can, you old sonofabitch!"

In the course of the next hour, Sheemie called Capi "you old sonofabitch" as often

as possible—he had discovered, as many others had before him, that on the first

cussword is really hard; after that, there's nothing quite like them for relieving

one's feelings.

4

Susan's trail cut diagonally across the Drop toward the coast and the grand old

adobe that rose there. When Sheemie reached Seafront, he dismounted outside the

arch and only stood, wondering what to do next. That they had come here, he had

no doubt—Susan's horse, Pylon, and the bad Coffin Hunter's horse were tethered

side by side in the shade, occasionally dropping their heads and blowing in the

pink stone trough that ran along the courtyard's ocean side.

What to do now? The riders who came and went beneath the arch (mostly white-

headed vaqs who'd been considered too old to form a part of Lengyll's party) paid

no attention to the inn-boy and his mule, but Miguel might be a different story.

The old mozo had never liked him, acted as if he thought Sheemie would turn

thief, given half a chance, and if he saw Coral's slop-and-carry-boy skulking in the

courtyard, Miguel would very likely drive him away.

No, he won't, he thought grimly. Not to-day, to-day I can't let him boss me. I won't go even if he hollers.

But if the old man did holler and raised an alarm, what then? The bad Cof?fin

Hunter might come and kill him. Sheemie had reached a point where he was

will?ing to die for his friends, but not un?less it served a pur?pose.

So he stood in the cold sun?light, shift?ing from foot to foot, ir?res?olute, wish?ing he

was smarter than he was, that he could think of a plan. An hour passed this way,

then two. It was slow time, each pass?ing mo?ment an ex?ercise in frus?tra?tion. He

sensed any op?por?tu?ni?ty to help Su?san?-sai slip ping away, but didn't know what to

do about it. Once he heard what sound?ed like thun?der from the west . . . al?though a

bright fall day like this didn't seem right for thun?der.

He had about de?cid?ed to chance the court?yard any?way—it was tem porar?ily

de?sert?ed, and he might be able to make it across to the main house—when the man

he had feared came stag?ger?ing out of the sta?bles.

Miguel Tor?res was fes?tooned with reap-?charms and was very drunk. He

ap?proached the cen?ter of the court?yard in rolling side-to-side loops, the tugstring

of his som?brero twist?ed against his scrawny throat, his long white hair fly?ing. The

front of his chi?bosa was wet, as if he had tried to take a leak with?out re?mem?ber?ing

that you had to un?lim?ber your din?gus first. He had a small ce?ram?ic jug in one

hand. His eyes were fierce and be?wil?dered.

“Who done this?” Miguel cried. He looked up at the af?ter?noon sky and the De?mon

Moon which float?ed there. Lit?tle as Sheemie liked the old man, his heart cringed.

It was bad luck to look di?rect?ly at old De?mon, so it was. “Who done this thing? I

ask that you tell me, senor! Por fa?vor!” A pause, then a scream so pow?er?ful that

Miguel reeled on his feet and al most fell. He raised his fists, as

if he would box

an answer out of the winking face in the moon, then dropped them wearily. Corn

liquor slopped from the neck of the jug and wet him further. "Mari'con," he

muttered. He staggered to the wall (almost tripping over the rear legs of the bad

Cof-fin Hunter's horse as he went), then sat down with his back against the adobe

wall. He drank deeply from the jug, then pulled his sombrero up and settled it over

his eyes. His arm twitched the jug, then settled it back, as if in the end it had

proved too heavy. Sheemie waited until the old man's thumb came unhooked from

the jughandle and the hand flopped onto the cobblestones. He started forward, then

decided to wait even a little longer. Miguel was old and Miguel was mean. but

Sheemie guessed Miguel might also be tricky. Lots of folks were, especially the

mean ones.

He waited until he heard Miguel's dusty snores, then led Capi in to the courtyard,

wincing at every clomp of the mule's hooves. Miguel never stirred, however.

Sheemie tied Capi to the end of the hitching rail (wincing again as Capi chose

brayed a tuneless greeting to the horses tied there), then walked quickly across to

the main door, through which he had never in his life expected to pass. He put his

hand on the great iron latch, looked back once more at the old man sleeping

against the wall, then opened the door and tiptoed in.

He stood for a moment in the oblong of sun the open door admitted, his shoulders

hunched all the way up to his ears, expecting a hand to settle on the scruff of his

neck (which bad-natured folk always seemed able to find, no matter how high you

hunched your shoulders) at any moment; an angry voice would follow, asking

what he thought he was doing here.

The foy'er stood empty and silent. On the far wall was a

tapestry de pict?ing

va?que?ros herd?ing hors?es along the Drop; against it leaned a
gui?tar with a bro?ken

string. Sheemie's feet sent back echoes no mat?ter how light?ly
he walked. He

shiv?ered. This was a house of mur?der now, a bad place. There
were like?ly ghosts.

Still, Su?san was here. Some?where.

He passed through the dou?ble doors on the far side of the foy?
er and en?tered the

re?cep?tion hall. Be?neath its high ceil?ing, his foot?falls echoed
more loud?ly than ev?er.

Long-?dead may?ors looked down at him from the walls; most
had spooky eyes that

seemed to fol?low him as he walked, mark?ing him as an in?
trud?er. He knew their

eyes were on?ly paint, but still . . .

One in par?tic?ular trou?bled him: a fat man with clouds of red
hair, a bull?dog mouth,

and a mean glare in his eye, as if he want?ed to ask what some
halfwit inn-?boy was

do?ing in the Great Hall at May?or's House.

"Quit look?ing at me that way, you big old sonuvabitch,"
Sheemie whis?pered, and

felt a lit?tle bet?ter. For the mo?ment, at least.

Next came the din?ing hall, al?so emp?ty, with the long tres?tle
ta?bles pushed back

against the wall. There was the re?mains of a meal on one—a
sin?gle plate of cold

chick?en and sliced bread, half a mug of ale. Look?ing at those
few bits of food on a

ta?ble that had served dozens at var?ious fairs and fes?ti?vals—
that should have served

dozens this very day—brought the enor?mi?ty of what had hap?
pened home to

Sheemie. And the sad?ness of it, too. Things had changed in
Ham?bry, and would

like?ly nev?er be the same again.

These long thoughts did not keep him from gob?bling the left?
over chick?en and

bread, or from chas?ing it with what re?mained in the ale?pot. It
had been a long,

food?less day.

He belched, clapped both hands over his mouth, eyes mak?ing
quick and guilty side-

to-?side darts above his dirty fin?gers, and then walked on.

The door at the far end of the room was latched but un?locked. Sheemie opened it

and poked his head out in?to the cor?ri?dor which ran the length of May?or's House.

The way was lit with gas chan?de?liers, and was as broad as an av?enue. It was

emp?ty—at least for the mo?ment—but he could hear whis?per?ing voic?es from oth?er

rooms, and per?haps oth?er floors, as well. He sup?posed they be?longed to the maids

and any oth?er ser?vants that might be about this af?ter?noon, but they sound?ed very

ghost?ly to him, just the same. Per?haps one be?longed to May?or Thorin, wan?der?ing

the cor ri?dor right in front of him (if Sheemie could but see him . . . which he was

glad he couldn't). May?or Thorin wan?der?ing and won?der?ing what had hap pened to

him, what this cold jel?ly?like stuff soak?ing in?to his night?shirt might be, who—

A hand gripped Sheemie's arm just above the el?bow. He al?most shrieked.

"Don't!" a wom?an whis?pered. "For your fa?ther's sake!"

Sheemie some?how man?aged to keep the scream in. He turned. And there, wear?ing

jeans and a plain checked ranch-?shirt, her hair tied back, her pale face set, her dark

eyes blaz?ing, stood the May?or's wid?ow.

"S-?S-?Sai Thorin ... I... I... I..."

There was noth?ing else he could think of to say. Now she'll call for the guards o'

the watch, if there be any left, he thought. In a way, it would be a re?lief

"Have ye come for the girl? The Del?ga?do girl?"

Grief had been good to Olive, in a ter?ri?ble way—had made her face seem less

plump, and odd?ly young. Her dark eyes nev?er left his, and for bade any at?tempt at

a lie. Sheemie nod?ded.

"Good. I can use your help, boy. She's down be?low, in the pantry, and she's

guard?ed."

Sheemie gaped, not be?liev?ing what he was hear?ing.

"Do you think I be?lieve she had any?thing to do with Hart's

mur?der?" Olive asked,

as if Sheemie had ob?ject?ed to her idea. "I may be fat and not so speedy on my pins

any?more, but I'm not a com?plete id?iot. Come on, now. Seafront's not a good place

for sai Del?ga?do just now—too many peo?ple from town know where she is."

5

"Roland."

He will hear this voice in un?easy dreams for the rest of his life, nev?er quite

re?mem?ber?ing what he has dreamed, on?ly know?ing that the dreams leave him

feel?ing ill some?how—walk?ing rest?less?ly, straight?en?ing pic?tures in love?less rooms,

lis?ten?ing to the call to muzzein in alien town squares.

"Roland of Gilead."

This voice, which he al?most rec?og?nizes; a voice so like his own that a psy?chi?atrist

from Ed?die's or Su?san?nah's or Jake's when-?and-?where would say it is his voice,

the voice of his sub?con?scious, but Roland knows bet?ter; Roland knows that of?ten

the voic?es that sound the most like our own when they speak in our heads are

those of the most ter?ri?ble out?siders, the most dan?ger?ous in?trud?ers.

"Roland, son of Steven."

The ball has tak?en him first to Ham?bry and to May?or's House, and he would see

more of what is hap?pen?ing there, but then it takes him away — calls him away in

that strange?ly fa?mil?iar voice, and he has to go. There is no choice be?cause, un?like

Rhea or Jonas, he is not watch?ing the ball and the crea?tures who speak

sound?less?ly with?in it; he is in?side the ball, a part of its end?less pink storm.

"Roland, come. Roland, see."

And so the storm whirls him first up and then away. He flies across the Drop,

ris?ing and ris?ing through stacks of air first warm and then cold, and he is not

alone in the pink storm which bears him west along the Path of the Beam. Sheb

flies past him, his hat cocked back on his head; he is singing
“Hey Jude ” at the

top of his lungs as his nicotine-stained fingers plink keys that
are not

there—transported by his tune, Sheb doesn’t seem to realize
that the storm has

ripped his piano away.

“Roland, come,”

the voice says—the voice of the storm, the voice of the glass—
and Roland comes.

The Romp flies by him, glassy eyes blazing with pink light. A
scrawny man in

farmer’s overalls goes flying past, his long red hair streaming
out behind him.

“Life for you, and for your crop, ” he says—something like that,
anyway—and then

he’s gone. Next, spinning like a weird windmill, comes an iron
chair (to Roland it

looks like a torture de vice) equipped with wheels, and the boy
gun-slinger thinks

The Lady of Shadows without knowing why he thinks it, or
what it means.

Now the pink storm is carrying him over blasted mountains,
now over a fertile

green delta where a broad river runs its oxbow squiggles like a
vein, reflecting a

placid blue sky that turns to the pink of wild roses as the storm
passes above.

Ahead, Roland sees an uprushing column of darkness and his
heart quails, but

this is where the pink storm is taking him, and this is where he
must go.

I want to get out, he thinks, but he’s not stupid, he realizes the
truth: he may never

get out. The wizard’s glass has swallowed him. He may re-
main in its stormy,

muddled eye forever.

I’ll shoot my way out, if I have to, he thinks, but no—he has no
guns. He is naked

in the storm, rushing backward toward that virulent blue-
black infection that has

buried all the landscape beneath it.

And yet he hears singing.

Faint but beautiful—a sweet harmonic sound that makes
him shiver and think of

Su?san: bird and bear and hare and fish.

Sud?den?ly Sheemie's mule (Capri?choso, Roland thinks, a beau?ti?ful name) goes past,

gal?lop?ing on thin air with his eyes as bright as fired?ims in the storm's lum?bre

fuego. Fol?low?ing him, wear?ing a som?br?era and rid ing a broom fes?tooned with

flut?ter?ing reap-?charms, comes Rhea of the Coos. "I'll get you, my pret?ty!" she

screams at the flee?ing mule, and then, cack?ling, she is gone, zoom?ing and

broom?ing.

Roland plunges in?to the black, and sud?den?ly his breath is gone. The world around

him is nox?ious dark?ness; the air seems to creep on his skin like a lay?er of bugs. He

is buf?fet?ed, boxed to and fro by in?vis?ible fists, then driv?en down?ward in a dive so

vi?olent he fears he will be smashed against the ground: so fell Lord Perth.

Dead fields and de?sert?ed vil?lages roll up out of the gloom; he sees blast?ed trees

that will give no shade—oh, but all is shade here, all is death here, this is the edge

of End-?World, where some dark day he will come, and all is death here.

"Gun?slinger, this is Thun?der?clap."

"Thun?der?clap," he says.

"Here are the un?breath?ing; the white faces."

"The un?breath?ing. The white faces. "

Yes. He knows that, some?how. This is the place of slaugh?tered sol diers, the cloven

helm, the rusty hal?berd; from here come the pale war?riors. This is Thun?der?clap,

where clocks run back?ward and the grave yards vom?it out their dead.

Ahead is a tree like a crooked, clutch?ing hand; on its top?most branch a bil?ly-

bum?bler has been im?paled. It should be dead, but as the pink storm car?ries Roland

past, it rais?es its head and looks at him with in?ex?press?ible pain and weari?ness.

"Oy!" it cries, and then it, too, is gone and not to be re?mem?bered for many years.

"Look ahead, Roland—see your des?tiny."

Now, suddenly, he knows that voice—it is the voice of the Tur?tle. He looks and

sees a brilliant blue-gold glow piercing the dirty dark ness of Thun?der?clap. Be?fore

he can do more than reg?is?ter it, he breaks out of the dark?ness and in?to the light

like some?thing com?ing out of an egg, a crea?ture at last be?ing born.

“Light! Let there be light!”

the voice of the Tur?tle cries, and Roland has to put his hands to his eyes and peek

through his fin?gers to keep from be?ing blind?ed. Be?low him is a field of blood—or

so he thinks then, a boy of four?teen who has that day done his first re?al killing.

This is the blood that has flowed out of Thun der?clap and threat?ens to drown our

side of the world, he thinks, and it will not be for un?told years that he will fi?nal?ly

re?dis?cov?er his time in?side the ball and put this mem?ory to?geth?er with Ed?die’s

dream and tell his com?-padres, as they sit in the turn?pike break?down lane at the

end of the night, that he was wrong, that he had been fooled by the bril?liance,

com?ing as it did, so hard on the heels of Thun?der?clap ’s shad?ows. “It wasn’t blood

but roses,” he tells Ed?die, Su?san?nah, and Jake.

“Gun?slinger, look—look there.”

Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-black pil?lar rear?ing on the hori?zon: the Dark Tow?er,

the place where all Beams, all lines of force, con?verge. In its spi?ral?ing win?dows he

sees fit?ful elec?tric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent with?in; he sens?es

both the strength of the place and the wrong?ness of it; he can feel how it is

spool?ing er?ror across ev?ery?thing, soft?en?ing the di?vi?sions be?tween the worlds, how

its po?ten?tial for mis?chief is grow?ing stronger even as dis?ease weak?ens its truth and

co?her?ence, like a body af flict?ed with can?cer; this jut?ting arm of dark gray stone is

the world’s great mys?tery and last aw?ful rid?dle.

It is the Tow?er, the Dark Tow?er rear?ing to the sky, and as

Roland rush?es to?ward it

in the pink storm, he thinks: I will en?ter you, me and my friends, if ka wills it so;

we will en?ter you and we will con?quer the wrong-?ness with? in you. It may be years

yet, but I swear by bird and bear and hare and fish, by all I love that—

But now the sky fills with flag?gy clouds which flow out of Thun?der clap, and the

world be?gins to go dark; the blue light from the Tow?er's ris ing win?dows shines

like mad eyes, and Roland hears thou?sands of scream?ing, wail?ing voic?es.

“You will kill ev?ery?thing and ev?ery?one you love,”

says the voice of the Tur?tle, and now it is a cru?el voice, cru?el and hard.

“and still the Tow?er will be pent shut against you.”

The gun?slinger draws in all his breath and draws to?geth?er all his force; when he

cries his an?swer to the Tur?tle, he does so for all the gen er? ations of his blood:

“NO! IT WILL NOT STAND! WHEN I COME HERE IN MY BODY, IT WILL NOT

STAND! I SWEAR ON MY FA THER 'S NAME. IT WILL NOT STAND!”

“Then die,”

the voice says, and Roland is hurled at the gray-?black stone flank of the Tow?er, to

be smashed there like a bug against a rock. But be?fore that can hap?pen—

6

Cuth?bert and Alain stood watch?ing Roland with in?creas?ing con?cern. He had the

piece of Maer?lyn's Rain?bow raised to his face, cupped in his hands as a man might

cup a cer?emo?ni?al gob?let be?fore mak?ing a toast. The draw? string bag lay crum?pled

on the dusty toes of his boots; his cheeks and fore?head were washed in a pink

glow that nei?ther boy liked. It seemed alive, some?how, and hun?gry.

They thought, as if with one mind: I can't see his eyes. Where are his eyes?

“Roland?” Cuth?bert re?peat?ed. “If we're go?ing to get out to Hang?ing Rock be?fore

they're ready for us, you have to put that thing away."

Roland made no move to lower the ball. He muttered something under his breath;

later, when Cuthbert and Alain had a chance to compare notes, they both agreed it had been thunderclap.

"Roland?" Alain asked, stepping forward. As gingerly as a surgeon slipping a

scalpel into the body of a patient, he slipped his right hand between the curve of

the ball and Roland's bent, studious face. There was no response. Alain pulled

back and turned to Cuthbert.

"Can you touch him?" Bert asked.

Alain shook his head. "Not at all. It's like he's gone somewhere far away."

"We have to wake him up." Cuthbert's voice was dusty and shaky at the edges.

"Vanoy told us that if you wake a person from a deep hypnotic trance too

suddenly, he can go mad," Alain said. "Remember? I don't know if I dare—"

Roland stirred. The pink sockets where his eyes had been seemed to grow. His

mouth flattened into the line of bitter determination they both knew well.

"No! It will not stand!" he cried in a voice that made gooseflesh ripple the skin of

the other two boys; that was not Roland's voice at all, at least not as he was now;

that was the voice of a man.

"No," Alain said much later, when Roland slept and he and Cuthbert, sat up

before the campfire. "That was the voice of a king."

Now, however, the two of them only looked at their absent, roaring friend,

paralyzed with fright.

"When I come here in my body, it will not stand! I swear on my father's name, IT

WILL NOT STAND!"

Then, as Roland's unnatural pink face contorted, like the face of a man who

confronts some unimaginable horror, Cuthbert and Alain lunged forward. It was

no longer a question of perhaps destroying him in an effort

to save him; if they

didn't do something, the glass would kill him as they watched.

In the doorway of the Bar K, it had been Cuthbert who clipped Roland; this time

Alain did the honors, administering a hard right to the center of the gunslinger's

forehead. Roland tumbled backward, the ball spilling out of his loosening hands

and the terrible pink light leaving his face. Cuthbert caught the boy and Alain

caught the ball. Its heavy pink glow was weirdly insistent, beating at his eyes and

pulling at his mind, but Alain stuffed it resolutely into the drawstring bag again

without looking at it... and as he pulled the cord, yanking the bag's mouth shut, he

saw the pink light wink out, as if it knew it had lost. For the time being, at least.

He turned back, and winced at the sight of the bruise puffing up from the middle

of Roland's brow. "Is he—"

"Out cold," Cuthbert said.

"He better come to soon."

Cuthbert looked at him grimly, with not a trace of his usual amiability. "Yes," he

said, "you're certainly right about that."

7

Sheemie waited at the foot of the stairs which led down to the kitchen area,

shifting uneasily from foot to foot and waiting for sai Thorin to come back, or to

call him. He didn't know how long she'd been in the kitchen, but it felt like

forever. He wanted her to come back, and more than that—more than

anything—he wanted her to bring Susan-sai with her. Sheemie had a terrible

feeling about this place and this day; a feeling that darkened like the sky, which

was now all obscured with smoke in the west. What was happening out there, or if

it had anything to do with the thunderous sounds he'd heard earlier, Sheemie didn't

know, but he wanted to be out of here before the smoke-hazed sun went down and

the re?al De mon Moon, not its pal?lid day-?ghost, rose in the sky.

One of the swing?ing doors be?tween the cor?ri?dor and the kitchen pushed open and

Olive came hur?ry?ing out.. She was alone.

“She’s in the pantry, all right,” Olive said. She raked her fin?gers through her

gray?ing hair. “I got that much out of those two pupuras, but no more. I knew it

was go?ing to be that way as soon as they start?ed talk?ing that stupid crunk of

theirs.”

There was no prop?er word for the di?alect of the Mejis va?que?ros, but “crunk”

served well enough among the Barony’s high?er-?born cit?izens. Olive knew both of

the vaqs guard?ing the pantry, in the vague way of a per?son who has once rid?den a

lot and passed gos?sip and weath?er with oth?er Drop-?rid?ers, and she knew damned

well these old boys could do bet?ter than crunk. They had spo?ken it so they could

pre?tend to mis?un?der stand her, and save both them and her the em?bar?rass?ment of

an out?right re?fusal. She had gone along with the de?cep?tion for much the same

rea?son, al?though she could have re?spond?ed with crunk of her own per?fect?ly

well—and called them some names their moth?ers nev?er used—had she want?ed.

“I told them there were men up?stairs,” she said, “and I thought maybe they meant

to steal the sil?ver. I said I want?ed the mal?ofi?cios turned out. And still they played

dumb. No habla, sai. Shit. Shit!”

Sheemie thought of call?ing them a cou?ple of big old sonuvabitch?es, and de?cid?ed to

keep silent. She was pac?ing back and forth in front of him and throw?ing an

oc?ca?sion?al burn?ing look at the closed kitchen doors. At last she stopped in front of

Sheemie again.

“Turn out your pock?ets,” she said. “Let’s see what you have for hopes and

gar?lands.”

Sheemie did as she asked, producing a little pocketknife (a gift from Stanley Ruiz)

and a half-eaten cookie from one. From the other he brought out three ladyfinger

firecrackers, a big-banger, and a few sulfur matches.

Olive's eyes gleamed when she saw these. "Listen to me, Sheemie," she said.

8

Cuthbert patted Roland's face with no result. Alain pushed him aside, knelt, and

took the gun-slinger's hands. He had never used the touch this way, but had been

told it was possible—that one could reach another's mind, in at least some cases.

Roland! Roland, wake up! Please! We need you!

At first there was nothing. Then Roland stirred, muttered, and pulled his hands out

of Alain's. In the moment before his eyes opened, both of the other two boys were

struck by the same fear of what they might see: no eyes at all, only ravaging pink

light.

But they were Roland's eyes, all right—those cool blue shooter's eyes.

He struggled to gain his feet, and failed the first time. He held out his hands.

Cuthbert took one, Alain the other. As they pulled him up, Bert saw a strange and

frightening thing: there were threads of white in Roland's hair. There had been

none that morning; he would have sworn to it. The morning had been a long time

ago, however.

"How long was I out?" Roland touched the bruise in the center of his forehead

with the tips of his fingers and winced.

"Not long," Alain said. "Five minutes, maybe. Roland, I'm sorry I hit you, but I

had to. It was ... I thought it was killing you."

"Mayhap 'twas. Is it safe?"

Alain pointed wordlessly to the drawstring bag.

"Good. It's best one of you carry it for now. I might be ... " He searched for the

right word, and when he found it, a small, winning smile touched the corners of his

mouth—"tempt?ed," he fin?ished. "Let's ride for Hang?ing Rock.
We've got work yet
to fin?ish."
"Roland . . ." Cuth?bert be?gan.
Roland turned, one hand on the horn of his horse's sad?dle.
Cuth?bert licked his lips, and for a mo?ment Alain didn't think
he would be able to
ask. If you don't, I will, Alain thought . . . but Bert man aged,
bring?ing the words
out in a rush.
"What did you see?"
"Much," Roland said. "I saw much, but most of it is al?ready
fad?ing out of my
mind, the way dreams do when you wake up. What I do re
mem?ber I'll tell you as
we ride. You must know, be?cause it changes ev?ery?thing.
We're go?ing back to
Gilead, but not for long."
"Where af?ter that?" Alain asked, mount?ing.
"West. In search of the Dark Tow?er. If we sur?vive to?day, that
is. Come on. Let's
take those tankers."

9

The two vaqs were rolling smokes when there was a loud bang
from up stairs.
They both jumped and looked at each oth?er, the to?bac?co
from their works?-in-
progress sift?ing down to the floor in small brown flur?ries. A
wom?an shrieked. The
doors burst open. It was the May?or's wid?ow again, this time
ac?com?pa?nied by a
maid. The vaqs knew her well—Maria Tomas, the daugh?ter of
an old com?padre
from the Pi?ano Ranch.
"The thiev?ing bas?tards have set the place on fire!" Maria cried,
speak ing to them
in crunk. "Come and help!"
"Maria, sai, we have or?ders to guard—"
"A puti?na locked in the pantry?" Maria shout?ed, her eyes
blaz?ing. "Come, ye
stupid old don?key, be?fore the whole place catch?es! Then ye
can ex?plain to Senor
Lengyll why ye stood here us?ing yer thumbs for fart-?corks
while Seafront burned
down around yer ears!"

"Go on!" Olive snapped. "Are you cow?ards?"

There were sev?er?al small?er bangs as, above them in the great par?lor, Sheemie set

off the la?dy-?fin?gers. He used the same match to light the drapes.

The two viejos ex?changed a glance. "An?de?lay, " said the old?er of the two, then

looked back at Maria. He no longer both?ered with the crunk. "Watch this door," he said.

"Like a hawk," she agreed.

The two old men bus?tled out, one grip?ping the cords of his bo?las, the oth?er pulling

a long knife from the scab?bard on his belt.

As soon as the wom?en heard their foot?steps on the stairs at the end of the hall,

Olive nod?ded to Maria and they crossed the room. Maria threw the bolts; Olive

pulled the door open. Su?san came out at once, look?ing from one to the oth?er, then

smil?ing ten?ta?tive?ly. Maria gasped at the sight of her mis?tress's swelled face and the

blood crust?ed around her nose.

Su?san took Maria's hand be?fore the maid could touch her face and squeezed her

fin?gers gen?tly. "Do ye think Thorin would want me now?" she asked, and then

seemed to re?al?ize who her oth?er res?cuer was. "Olive ... sai Thorin ... I'm sor?ry. I

didn't mean to be cru?el. But ye must be?lieve that Roland, him ye know as Will

Dear?born, would nev?er—"

"I know it well," Olive said, "and there's no time for this now. Come on."

She and Maria led Su?san out of the kitchen, away from the stairs as cend?ing to the

main house and to?ward the stor?age rooms at the far north end of the low?er lev?el. In

the dry?goods stor?age room, Olive told the two of them to wait. She was gone for

per?haps five min?utes, but to Su?san and Maria it seemed an eter?ni?ty.

When she came back, Olive was wear?ing a wild?ly col?ored scrape much too big for

her—it might have been her hus?band's, but Su?san thought it

looked too big for the

late May?or, as well. Olive had tucked a piece of it in?to the side of her jeans to keep

from stum?bling over it. Slung over her arm like blan?kets, she had two more, both

small?er and lighter. "Put these on," she said. "It's go?ing to be cold."

Leav?ing the dry?goods store, they went down a nar?row ser?vants' pas?sage?way

to?ward the back court?yard. There, if they were for?tu?nate (and if Miguel was still

un?con?scious), Sheemie would be wait?ing for them with mounts. Olive hoped with

all her heart that they would be for?tu?nate. She want?ed Su?san safe?ly away from

Ham?bry be?fore the sun went down.

And be?fore the moon rose.

10

"Su?san's been tak?en pris?on?er," Roland told the oth?ers as they rode west to?ward

Hang?ing Rock. "That's the first thing I saw in the glass."

He spoke with such an air of ab?sence that Cuth?bert al?most reined up. This wasn't

the ar?dent lover of the last few months. It was as if Roland had found a dream to

ride through the pink air with?in the ball, and part of him rode it still. Or is it rid?ing

him? Cuth?bert won?dered.

"What?" Alain asked. "Su?san tak?en? How? By whom? Is she all right?"

"Tak?en by Jonas. He hurt her some, but not too bad?ly. She'll heal . . . and she'll

live. I'd turn around in a sec?ond if I thought her life was in any re?al dan?ger."

Ahead of them, ap?pear?ing and dis?ap?pear?ing in the dust like a mi?rage, was Hang?ing

Rock. Cuth?bert could see the sun?light prick?ing hazy sun?stars on the tankers, and

he could see men. A lot of them. A lot of hors?es, as well. He pat?ted the neck of his

own mount, then glanced across to make sure Alain had Lengyll's ma?chine?gun.

He did. Cuth?bert reached around to the small of his back, mak?ing sure of the

sling?shot. It was there. Al?so his deer?skin am?mu?ni?tion bag,

which now con?tained a

num?ber of the big-?bangers Sheemie had stolen as well as steel shot.

He's us?ing ev?ery ounce of his will to keep from go?ing back, any?way, Cuth?bert

thought. He found the re?al?iza?tion com?fort?ing—some?times Roland scared him.

There was some?thing in him that went be?yond steel. Some thing like mad?ness. If it

was there, you were glad to have it on your side ... but of?ten enough you wished it

wasn't there at all. On any?body's side.

"Where is she?" Alain asked.

"Reynolds took her back to Seafront. She's locked in the pantry ... or was locked

there. I can't say which, ex?act?ly, be?cause . . ." Roland paused, think?ing. "The ball

sees far, but some?times it sees more. Some?times it sees a fu?ture that's al?ready

hap?pen?ing."

"How can the fu?ture al?ready be hap?pen?ing?" Alain asked. "I don't know, and I

don't think it was al?ways that way. I think it's more to do with the world than

Maer?lyn's Rain?bow. Time is strange now. We know that, don't we? How things

some?times seem to ... slip. It's al?most as if there's a thin?ny ev?ery?where, break?ing

things down. But Su san's safe. I know that, and that's enough for me. Sheemie is

go?ing to help her ... or is help?ing her. Some?how Jonas missed Sheemie, and he

fol?lowed Su?san all the way back."

"Good for Sheemie!" Alain said, and pumped his fist in?to the air. "Hur?rah!" Then:

"What about us? Did you see us in this fu?ture?"

"No. This part was all quick—I hard?ly snatched more than a glance be?fore the ball

took me away. Flew me away, it seemed. But ... I saw smoke on the hori?zon. I

re?mem?ber that. It could have been the smoke of burn?ing tankers, or the brush piled

in front of Eye?bolt, or both. I think we're go?ing to suc?ceed."

Cuth?bert was look?ing at his old friend in a queer?ly dis?traught way. The young man

so deeply in love that Bert had need?ed to knock him in?to the dust of the court?yard

in or?der to wake him up to his re?spon?si?bil?ities . . . where was that young man,

ex?act?ly? What had changed him, giv?en him those dis?turb?ing strands of white hair?

“If we sur?vive what’s ahead,” Cuth?bert said, watch?ing the gun?slinger close?ly,

“she’ll meet us on the road. Won’t she, Roland?”

He saw the pain on Roland’s face, and now un?der?stood: the lover was here, but the

ball had tak?en away his joy and left on?ly grief. That, and some new pur?pose—yes,

Cuth?bert felt it very well—which had yet to be stat?ed.

“I don’t know,” Roland said. “I al?most hope not, be?cause we can nev?er be as we were.”

“What? ” This time Cuth?bert did rein up.

Roland looked at him calm?ly enough, but now there were tears in

his eyes.

“We are fools of ka” the gun?slinger said. “Ka like a wind, Su?san calls it.” He

looked first at Cuth?bert on his left, then at Alain on his right. “The Tow?er is our

ka; mine es?pe?cial?ly. But it isn’t hers, nor she mine. No more is John Par?son our ka.

We’re not go?ing to?ward his men to de?feat him, but on?ly be?cause they’re in our

way.” He raised his hands, then dropped them again, as if to say, What more do

you need me to tell you?

“There is no Tow?er, Roland,” Cuth?bert said pa?tient?ly. “I don’t know what you saw

in that glass ball, but there is no Tow?er. Well, as a sym?bol, I sup?pose—like

Arthur’s Cup, or the Cross of the man?-Je?sus—but not as a re?al thing, a re?al

build?ing—”

“Yes,” Roland said. “It’s re?al.”

They looked at him un?cer?tain?ly, and saw no doubt on his face. “It’s re?al, and our

fa?thers know. Be?yond the dark land—I can’t re mem?ber its name now, it’s one of

the things I’ve lost—is End?-World, and in End?-World stands

the Dark Tower. Its

existence is the great secret our fathers keep; it's what has held them together as ka-

tet across all the years of the world's decline. When we return to Gilead—if we

return, and I now think we will—I'll tell them what I've seen, and they'll confirm

what I say."

"You saw all that in the glass?" Alain asked in an awe-hushed voice.

"I saw much."

"But not Susan Delgado," Cuthbert said.

"No. When we finish with yonder men and she finishes with Mejis, her part in our

katet ends. Inside the ball, I was given a choice: Susan, and my life as her

husband and father of the child she now carries ... or the Tower." Roland wiped his

face with a shaking hand. "I would choose Susan in an instant, if not for one thing:

the Tower is crumbling, and if it falls, everything we know will be swept away.

There will be chaos beyond our imagining. We must go ... and we will go."

Above his young and unlined cheeks, below his young and unlined brow, were the

ancient killer's eyes that Ed die Dean would first glimpse in the mirror of an

air liner's bathroom. But now they swam with childish tears.

There was nothing childish in his voice, however.

"I choose the Tower. I must. Let her live a good life and long with someone

else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tower."

11

Susan mounted on Pylon, which Sheemie had hastened to bring around to the rear

courtyard after lighting the draperies of the great parlor on fire. Olive Thorin rode

one of the Barony geldings with Sheemie doubled-mounted behind her and holding

onto Capi's lead. Maria opened the back gate, wished them good luck, and the

three trotted out. The sun was setting now, but the wind had pulled away most

of the smoke that had risen earlier. Whatever had hap-

pened in the desert, it was

over now ... or hap pen?ing on some oth?er lay?er of the same present time.

Roland, be thee well, Su?san thought. I'll see thee soon, dear . . . as soon as I can.

"Why are we go?ing north?" she asked af?ter half an hour's silent rid?ing.

"Be?cause Sea?coast Road's best."

"But—"

"Hush! They'll find you gone and search the house first . . . if t'asn't burned flat,

that is. Not find?ing you there, they'll send west, along the Great Road." She cast an

eye on Su?san that was not much like the dith?ery, slight?ly con?fab?ulat?ed Olive

Thorin that folks in Ham?bry knew ... or thought they knew. "If I know that's the

di?rec?tion you'd choose, so will oth?ers we'd do well to avoid."

Su?san was silent. She was too con?fused to speak, but Olive seemed to know what

she was about, and Su?san was grate?ful for that.

"By the time they get around to sniff?ing west, it'll be dark. Tonight we'll stay in

one of the sea?-cliff caves five miles or so from here. I grew up a fish?er?man's

daugh?ter, and I know all those caves, none bet?ter." The thought of the caves she'd

played in as a girl seemed to cheer her. "To mor?row we'll cut west, as you like. I'm

afraid you're go?ing to have a plump old wid?ow as a chap?er?one for a bit. Bet?ter get

used to the idea."

"Thee's too good," Su?san said. "Ye should send Sheemie and I on alone, sai."

"And go back to what? Why, I can't even get two old trail?hands on kitchen?-du?ty to

fol?low my or?ders. Fran Lengyll's boss of the shoot?ing?-match now, and I've no urge

to wait and see how he does at it. Nor if he de?cides he'd be bet?ter off with me

ad?judged mad and put up safe in a haci with bars on the win?dows. Or shall I stay

to see how Hash Ren?frew does as May?or, with his boots up on my ta?bles?" Olive

ac?tu?al?ly laughed.

“Sai, I’m sor’ry.”

“We shall all be sor’ry lat’er on,” Olive said, sound’ing re’mark’ably cheery about it.

“For now, the most im’por’tant thing is to reach those caves un’ob’served. It must

seem that we van’ished in’to thin air. Hold up.”

Olive checked her horse, stood in the stir’rups, looked around to make sure of her

po’si’tion, nod’ded, then twist’ed in the sad’dle so she could speak to Sheemie.

“Young man, it’s time for ye to mount yer trusty mule and go back to Seafront. If

there are rid’ers com’ing af’ter us, ye must turn em aside with a few well-’cho’sen

words. Will’ee do that?”

Sheemie looked strick’en. “I don’t have any well-’cho’sen words, sai Thorin, so I

don’t. I hard’ly have any words at all.”

“Non’sense,” Olive said, and kissed Sheemie’s fore’head. “Go back at a good’ish

trot. If’ee spy no one com’ing af’ter us by the time the sun touch’es the hills, then

turn north again and fol’low. We shall wait for ye by the sign’ post. Do ye know

where I mean?”

Sheemie thought he did, al’tough it marked the out’most north’ern bound’ary of his

lit’tle patch of ge’og’ra’phy. “The red ‘un’ With the som brero on it, and the ar’row

point’ing back for town?”

“The very one. Ye won’t get that far un’til af’ter dark, but there’ll be plen’ty of

moon’light tonight. If ye don’t come right away, we’ll wait. But ye must go back,

and shift any men that might be chas’ing us off our track. Do ye un’der’sand?”

Sheemie did. He slid off Olive’s horse, clucked Capri’choso for’ ward, and climbed

on board, winc’ing as the place the mule had bit’ten came down. “So it’ll be, Olive-

sai.”

“Good, Sheemie. Good. Off’ee go, then.”

“Sheemie?” Su’san said. “Come to me a mo’moment, please.”

He did, hold’ing his hat in front of him and look’ing up at her wor’ship-’ful’ly. Su’san

bent and kissed him not on the forehead but firmly on the mouth. Sheemie came close to fainting.

"Thankee-sai," Su-san said. "For everything."

Sheemie nodded. When he spoke, he could manage nothing above a whisper. "

"Twas only ka," he said. "I know that... but I love you, Su-san-sai. Go well. I'll see you soon."

"I look forward to it."

But there was no soon, and no later for them, either. Sheemie took one look back

as he rode his mule south, and waved. Su-san lifted her own hand in return. It was

the last Sheemie ever saw of her, and in many ways, that was a blessing.

12

Lati-go had set pickets a mile out from Hanging Rock, but the blond boy Roland,

Cuthbert, and Alain encountered as they closed in on the tankers looked confused

and unsure of himself, no danger to anyone. He had scurvy-blossoms around his

mouth and nose, suggesting that the men Farson had sent on this duty had ridden

hard and fast, with little in the way of fresh supplies.

When Cuthbert gave the Good Man's signal—hands clasped to the chest, left above

right, then both held out to the person being greeted—the blond picket did the

same, and with a grateful smile.

"What spin and rattle back there?" he asked, speaking with a strong In-World

accent—to Roland, the boy sounded like a Nordite.

"Three boys who killed a couple of big bugs and then hied for the hills." Cuthbert

replied. He was an eerily good mimic, and gave the boy back his own accent

faultlessly. "I here were a tight. It be over now, but they did fight fearfully."

"What—"

"No time," Roland said brusquely. "We have dispatches." He crossed his hands on

his chest, then held them out. "Hile! Farson!"

"Good Man!" the blond returned smartly. He gave back the

salute with a smile that

said he would have asked Cuthbert where he was from and who he was related to,

if there had been more time. Then they were past him and inside Latiago's

perimeter. As easy as that.

"Remember that it's hit-and-run," Roland said. "Slow down for nothing. What we

don't get must be left—there'll be no second pass."

"Gods, don't even suggest such a thing," Cuthbert said, but he was smiling. He

pulled his sling out of its rudimentary holster and tested its elastic draw with a

thumb. Then he licked the thumb and hoisted it to the wind. Not much problem

there, if they came in as they were; the wind was strong, but at their backs.

Alain unslung Lengyll's machine-gun, looked at it doubtfully, then yanked back

the slide-cock. "I don't know about this, Roland. It's loaded, and I think I see how

to use it, but—"

"Then use it," Roland said. The three of them were picking up speed now, the

hooves of their horses drumming against the hardpan. The wind gusted, belling the

fronts of their scrapes. "This is the sort of work it was meant for. If it jams, drop it

and use your revolver. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Roland."

"Bert?"

"Aye," Cuthbert said in a wildly exaggerated Hambracent, "so I am, so I am."

Ahead of them, dust puffed as groups of riders passed before and behind the

tankers, readying the column for departure. Men on foot looked around at the

oncomers curiously but with a fatal lack of alarm.

Roland drew both revolvers. "Gilead!" he cried. "Hile! Gilead!"

He spurred Rusher to a gallop. The other two boys did the same. Cuthbert was in

the middle again, sitting on his reins, sling-shot in hand, lucifer matches radiating

out of his tightly pressed lips.

The gunslingers rode down on Hanging Rock like furies.

Twen?ty min?utes af?ter send?ing Sheemie back south, Su?san and Olive came around

a sharp bend and found them?selves face to face with three mount?ed men in the

road. In the late-?slant?ing sun, she saw that the one in the mid?dle had a blue cof?fin

tat?tooed on his hand. It was Reynolds. Su san's heart sank.

The one on Reynolds's left—he wore a stained white drover's hat and had a lazi?ly

cocked eye—she didn't know, but the one on the right, who looked like a stony-

heart?ed preach?er, was Laslo Rimer. It was Rimer that Reynolds glanced at, af?ter

smil?ing at Su?san.

“Why, Las and I couldn't even get us a drink to send his late broth?er, the

Chan?cel?lor of What?ev?er You Want and the Min?is?ter of Thank You Very Much, on

with a word,” Reynolds said. “We hadn't hard?ly hit town be?fore we got per?sua?ed

out here. I wasn't go?ing to go, but . . . damn! That old la?dy's some?thing. Could talk

a corpse in?to giv?ing a blowjob, if you'll par?don the cru?di?ty. I think your aunt may

have lost a wheel or two off her cart, though, sai Del?ga?do. She —“

“Your friends are dead,” Su?san told him.

Reynolds paused, shrugged. “Well now. Maybe si and maybe no. Me, I think I've

de?cid?ed to trav?el on with?out em even if they ain't. But I might hang around here

one more night. This Reap?ing busi?ness . . . I've heard so much about the way folks

do it in the Out?ers. ‘Spe?cial?ly the bon?fire part.’”

The man with the cocked eye laughed phleg?mi?ly.

“Let us pass,” Olive said. “This girl has done noth?ing, and nei?ther have I.”

“She helped Dear?born es?cape,” Rimer said, “him who mur?dered your own hus?band

and my broth?er. I wouldn't call that noth?ing.”

“The gods may re?store Kim?ba Rimer in the clear?ing,” Olive said, “but the truth is

he loot?ed half of this town's trea?sury, and what he didn't give over to John Far?son,

he kept for him?self.“

Rimer re?coiled as if slapped.

”Ye didn’t know I knew? Laslo, I’d be an?gry at how lit?tle any of ye thought of me

... ex?cept why would I want to be thought of by the likes of you, any?way? I knew

enough to make me sick, leave it at that. I know that the man you’re sit?ting

be?side—“

”Shut up,“ Rimer mut?tered.

”—was like?ly the one who cut yer broth?er’s black heart open; sai Reynolds was

seen that ear?ly morn?ing in that wing, so I’ve been told—“

”Shut up, you cunt!“

”—and so I be?lieve.“

”Bet?ter do as he says, sai, and hold your tongue,“ Reynolds said. Some of the lazy

good hu?mor had left his face. Su?san thought: He doesn’t like peo?ple know?ing what

he did. Not even when he’s the one on top and what they know can’t hurt him. And

he’s less with?out Jonas. A lot less. He knows it, too.

”Let us pass,“ Olive said.

”No, sai, I can’t do that.“

”I’ll help ye, then, shall I?”

Her hand had crept be?neath the out?ra?geous?ly large ser?ape dur?ing the palaver, and

now she brought out a huge and an?cient pis?to?la, its han?dles of yel?lowed ivory, its

fil?igreed bar?rel of old tar?nished sil?ver. On top was a brass pow?der-?and-?spark.

Olive had no busi?ness even draw?ing the thing—it caught on her ser?ape, and she

had to fight it free. She had no busi?ness cock?ing it, ei?ther, a pro?cess that took both

thumbs and two tries. But the three men were ut ter?ly flum?moxed by the sight of

the el?der?ly blun?der?buss in her hands, Reynolds as much as the oth?er two; he sat his

horse with his jaw hang?ing slack. Jonas would have wept.

“Get her!” a cracked old voice shrieked from be?hind the men block ing the road.

“What’s wrong with ye, ye stupid culls? GET HER!”

Reynolds start?ed at that and went for his gun. He was fast, but he had giv?en Olive

too much of a head?start and was beat?en, beat?en cold. Even as he cleared leather

with the bar?rel of his re?volver, the May?or's wid?ow held the old gun out in both

hands, and, squinch?ing her eyes shut like a lit?tle girl who is forced to eat

some?thing nasty, pulled the trig?ger.

The spark flashed, but the damp pow?der on?ly made a weary flop sound and

dis?ap?peared in a puff of blue smoke. The ball—big enough to have tak?en Clay

Reynolds's head off from the nose on up, had it fired— stayed in the bar?rel.

In the next in?stant his own gun roared in his fist. Olive's horse reared, whin?ny?ing.

Olive went off the geld?ing head over boots, with a black hole in the or?ange stripe

of her ser?ape—the stripe which lay above her heart.

Su?san heard her?self scream?ing. The sound seemed to come from very far away.

She might have gone on for some time, but then she heard the clop of ap?proach?ing

pony hooves from be?hind the men in the road... and knew. Even be?fore the man

with the lazy eye moved aside to show her, she knew, and her screams stopped.

The gal?loped-?out pony that had brought the witch back to Ham?bry had been

re?placed by a fresh one, but it was the same black cart, the same gold?en ca?bal?is?tic

sym?bols, the same driv?er. Rhea sat with the reins in her claws, her head tick?ing

from side to side like the head of a rusty old robot, grin?ning at Su?san with?out

hu?mor. Grin?ning as a corpse grins.

“Hel?lo, my lit?tle sweet?ing,” she said, call?ing her as she had all those months ago,

on the night Su?san had come to her hut to be proved hon?est. On the night Su?san

had come run?ning most of the way, out of sim?ple high spir?its. Be?neath the light of

the Kiss?ing Moon she had come, her blood high from the ex?er?cise, her skin

flushed; she had been singing “Care less Love.”

“Yer pal?lies and screw-?bud?dies have tak?en my ball, ye ken,”

Rhea said, cluck?ing

the pony to a stop a few paces ahead of the riders. Even Reynolds looked down on

her with uneasiness. "Took my lovely glam, that's what those bad boys did. Those

bad, bad boys. But it showed me much while yet I had it, aye. It sees far, and in

more ways than one. Much of it I've forgotten ... but not which way ye'd come, my

sweet?ing. Not which way that precious old dead bitch lay?ing yonder on the road

would bring ye. And now ye must go to town." Her grin widened, became

some thing unspeak?able. "It's time for the fair, ye ken."

"Let me go," Susan said. "Let me go, if ye'd not answer to Roland of Gilead."

Rhea ignored her and spoke to Reynolds. "Bind her hands before her and stand her

in the back of the cart. There's people that'll want to see her. A good look is what

they'll want, and a good look is just what they'll have. If her aunt's done a proper

job, there'll be a lot of them in town. Get her up, now, and be smart about it."

14

Alain had time for one clear thought: We could have gone around them— if what

Roland said is true, then only the wizard's glass matters, and we have that. We

could have gone around them.

Except, of course, that was impossible. A hundred generations of gun?slinger blood

argued against it. Tower or no Tower, the thieves must not be allowed to have

their prize. Not if they could be stopped.

Alain leaned forward and spoke directly into his horse's ear. "Jig or rear when I

start shoot?ing, and I'll knock your fuck?ing brains out."

Roland led them in, outracing the other two on his stronger horse. The clot of men

nearest by—five or six mounted, a dozen or more on foot and examining a pair of

the ox?en which had dragged the tankers out here— gazed at him stupidly until he

began to fire, and then they scattered like quail. He got every

one of the riders;

their horses fled in a widening fan, trailing their reins (and, in one case, a dead

soldier). Somewhere someone was shouting, "Harriders! Harriders! Mount up, you fools!"

"Alain!" Roland screamed as they bore down. In front of the tankers, a double

handful of riders and armed men were coming together—milling together—in a

clumsy defensive line. "Now! Now!"

Alain raised the machine-gun, seated its rusty wire stock in the hollow of his

shoulder, and remembered what little he knew about rapid-fire weapons: aim low, swing fast and smooth.

He touched the trigger and the speed-shooter belled into the dusty air, recoiling

against his shoulder in a series of rapid thuds, shooting bright fire from the end of

its perforated barrel. Alain raked it from left to right, running the sight above the

scattering, shouting defenders and across the high steel hides of the tankers.

The third tanker accidentally blew up on its own. The sound it made was like no

explosion Alain had ever heard: a guttural, muscular ripping sound accompanied

by a brilliant flash of orange-red fire. The steel shell rose in two halves. One of

these spun thirty yards through the air and landed on the desert floor in a furious

burning hulk; the other rose straight up into a column of greasy black smoke. A

burning wooden wheel spun across the sky like a plate and came back down

trailing sparks and burning splinters.

Men fled, screaming—some on foot, others laid flat along the necks of their nags,

their eyes wide and panicked.

When Alain reached the end of the line of tankers, he reversed the track of the

muzzle. The machine-gun was hot in his hands now, but he kept his finger pressed

to the trigger. In this world, you had to use what you could

while it still worked.

Be?neath him, his horse ran on as if it had un?der?stood ev?ery word Alain had

whis?pered in its ear.

An?oth?er! I want an?oth?er!

But be?fore he could blow an?oth?er tanker, the gun ceased its chat?ter— per?haps

jammed, prob?ably emp?ty. Alain threw it aside and drew his revolver. From be?side

him there came the thuppp of Cuth?bert's sling?shot, au?di?ble even over the cries of

the men, the hoof?beats of the hors?es, the whoosh of the burn?ing tanker. Alain saw

a sput?ter?ing big-?bang arc in?to the sky and come down ex?actly where Cuth?bert had

aimed: in the oil pud dling around the wood?en wheels of a tanker marked suno?co.

For a mo ment Alain could clear?ly see the line of nine or a dozen holes in the

tanker's bright side—holes he had put there with sai Lengyll's speed-?shoot?er—and

then there was a crack and a flash as the big-?bang ex?plod?ed. A mo?ment lat?er, the

holes run?ning along the bright flank of the tanker be gan to shim?mer. The oil

be?neath them was on fire.

“Get out!” a man in a fad?ed cam?paign hat yelled. “She's goin?ter blow! They 're all

go?ing to b— ”

Alain shot him, ex?plod?ing the side of his face and knock?ing him out of one old,

sprung boot. A mo?ment lat?er the sec?ond tanker blew up. One burn?ing steel pan?el

shot out side?wards, land?ed in the grow?ing pud?dle of crude oil be?neath a third

tanker, and then that one ex?plod?ed, as well. Black smoke rose in the air like the

fumes of a fu?ner?al pyre; it dark?ened the day and drew an oily veil across the sun.

15

All six of Par?son's chief lieu?tenants had been care?ful?ly de?scribed to Roland—to all

four?teen gun?slingers in train?ing—and he rec?og?nized the man run?ning for the

re?mu?da at once: George Lati?go. Roland could have shot him

as he ran, but that,

ironically, would have made possible a get away that was cleaner than he wanted.

Instead, he shot the man who ran to meet him.

Latiago wheeled on the heels of his boots and stared at Roland with blazing, hate-

filled eyes. Then he ran again, hiling another man, shouting for the riders who

were huddled to gether beyond the burning zone.

Two more tankers exploded, whamming at Roland's eardrums with dull iron fists,

seeming to suck the air back from his lungs like a rip tide. The plan had been for

Alain to perforate the tankers and for Cuthbert to then shoot in a steady, arcing

stream of big-bangers, lighting the spilling oil. The one big-banger he actually

shot seemed to confirm that the plan had been feasible, but it was the last sling-shot-

work Cuthbert did that day.

The ease with which the gunslingers had gotten inside the enemy's perimeter and

the confusion which greeted their original charge could have been chalked up to

inexperience and exhaustion, but the placing of the tankers had been Latiago's

mistake, and his alone. He had drawn them tight without even thinking about it,

and now they blew tight, one after another. Once the confusion began, there

was no chance of stopping it. Even before Roland raised his left arm and circled it

in the air, signalling for Alain and Cuthbert to break off, the work was done.

Latiago's command was an oily inferno, and John Farson's plans for a

motORIZED assault were so much black smoke being tattered apart by the fin de ano

wind.

"Ride!" Roland screamed. "Ride, ride, ride!"

They spurred west, toward Eyebolt Canyon. As they went, Roland felt a single

bullet drone past his left ear. It was, so far as he knew, the only shot fired at any of

them during the assault on the tankers.

Lati?go was in an ec?sta?sy of fury, a per?fect brain-?burst?ing rage, and that was

prob?ably mer?ci?ful—it kept him from think?ing of what the Good Man would do

when he learned of this fi?as?co. For the time be?ing, all Lati?go cared about was

catch?ing the men who had am?bushed him ... if an am bush in desert coun?try was

even pos?si?ble.

Men? No.

The boys who had done this.

Lati?go knew who they were, all right; he didn't know how they had got?ten out

here, but he knew who they were, and their run would stop right here, east of the

woods and ris?ing hills.

“Hen?dricks!” he bawled. Hen?dricks had at least man?aged to hold his men—half a

dozen of them, all mount?ed—near the re?mu?da. “Hen?dricks, to me!”

As Hen?dricks rode to?ward him, Lati?go spun the oth?er way and saw a hud?dle of

men stand?ing and watch?ing the burn?ing tankers. Their gap?ing mouths and stupid

young sheep faces made him feel like scream?ing and danc?ing up and down, but he

re?fused to give in to that. He held a nar?row beam of con?cen?tra?tion, one aimed

di?rect?ly at the raiders, who must not un?der any cir?cum?stances be al?lowed to

es?cape.

“You!” he shout?ed at the men. One of them turned; the oth?ers did not. Lati?go

strode to them, draw?ing his pis?tol as he went. He slapped it in?to the hand of the

man who had turned to?ward the sound of his voice, and point?ed at ran?dom to one

of those who had not. “Shoot that fool.”

Dazed, his face that of a man who be?lieves he is dream?ing, the sol?dier raised the

pis?tol and shot the man to whom Lati?go had point?ed. That un lucky fel?low went

down in a heap of knees and el?bows and twitch?ing hands. The oth?ers turned.

"Good," Lati?go said, tak?ing his gun back.

"Sir!" Hen?dricks cried. "I see them, sir! I have the en?emy in clear view!"

Two more tankers ex?ploded. A few whick?er?ing shards of steel flew in their

di?rec?tion. Some of the men ducked; Lati?go did not so much as twitch. Nor did

Hen?dricks. A good man. Thank God for at least one such in this night?mare.

"Shall I hie af?ter them, sir? "

"I'll take your men and hie af?ter them my?self, Hen?dricks. Mount these hoss-?guts

be?fore us." He swept an arm at the stand?ing men, whose doltish at?ten?tion had been

di?vert?ed from the burn?ing tankers to their dead com?rade. "Pull in as many oth?ers

as you can. Do you have a bu?gler?"

"Yes, sir, Raines, sir!" Hen?dricks looked around, beck?oned, and a pim?ply, scared-

look?ing boy rode for?ward. A dent?ed bu?gle on a frayed strap hung askew on the

front of his shirt.

"Raines," Lati?go said, "you're with Hen?dricks."

"Yes, sir."

"Get as many men as you can, Hen?dricks, but don't linger over the job. They're

head?ed for that canyon, and I be?lieve some?one told me it's a box. If so, we're go?ing

to turn it in?to a shoot?ing gallery."

Hen?dricks's lips spread in a twist?ed grin. "Yes, sir."

Be?hind them, the tankers con?tin?ued to ex?plode.

17

Roland glanced back and was as?ton?ished by the size of the black, smoky col?umn

ris?ing in?to the air. Ahead he could clear?ly see the brush block?ing most of the

canyon's mouth. And al?though the wind was blow?ing the wrong way, he could

now hear the mad?den?ing mosquito-?whine of the thin?ny.

He pat?ted the air with his out?stretched hands, sig?nalling for Cuth?bert and Alain to

slow down. While they were both still look?ing at him, he took off his ban?dan?na,

whipped it in?to a rope, and tied it so it would cov?er his ears. They copied him. It

was bet?ter than noth?ing.

The gun?slingsers con?tinue?d west, their shad?ows now run?ning out be hind them as

long as gantries on the desert floor. Look?ing back, Roland could see two groups of

rid?ers stream?ing in pur?suit. Lati?go was at the head of the first, Roland thought, and

he was de?lib?er?ate?ly hold?ing his rid ers back a lit?tle, so that the two groups could

merge and at?tack to?geth?er.

Good, he thought.

The three of them rode to?ward Eye?bolt in a tight line, con?tinue?ing to hold their own

hors?es in, al?low?ing their pur?suers to close the dis?tance. Ev?ery now and then

an?oth?er thud smote the air and shiv?ered through the ground as one of the

re?main?ing tankers blew up. Roland was amazed at how easy it had been—even

af?ter the bat?tle with Jonas and Lengyll, which should have put the men out here on

their met?tle, it had been easy. It made him think of a Reap?tide long ago, he and

Cuth?bert sure?ly no more than sev?en years old, run?ning along a line of stuffy?-?guys

with sticks, knock?ing them over one af?ter the oth?er, bang?-?bang?-?bangety?-?bang.

The sound of the thin?ny was war?bling its way in?to his brain in spite of the

ban?dan?na over his ears, mak?ing his eyes wa?ter. Be?hind him, he could hear the

whoops and shouts of the pur?suing men. It de?light?ed him. Lati?go's men had

count?ed the odds—two dozen against three, with many more of their own force

rid?ing hard to join the bat?tle—and their peck?ers were up once more.

Roland faced front and point?ed Rush?er at the slit in the brush mark?ing the en?trance

to Eye?bolt Canyon.

18

Hen?dricks fell in be?side Lati?go, breath?ing hard, cheeks glar?ing with col?or. "Sir!

Beg to re?port!"

"Then do it."

"I have twen?ty men, and there are p'raps three times that num?ber rid ing hard to join us."

Lati?go ig?nored all of this. His eyes were bright blue flecks of ice. Un der his

mus?tache was a small, greedy smile. "Rod?ney," he said, speak ing Hen?dricks's first

name al?most with the ca?ress of a lover.

"Sir?"

"I think they're go?ing in, Rod?ney. Yes . . . look. I'm sure of it. Two more min?utes

and it'll be too late for them to turn back." He raised his gun, laid the muz?zle

across his fore?arm, and threw a shot at the three rid ers ahead, most?ly in

ex?uber?ance.

"Yes, sir, very good, sir." Hen?dricks turned and waved vi?cious?ly for his men to

close up, close up.

19

"Dis?mount!" Roland shout?ed when they reached the line of tan?gled brush. It had a

smell that was at once dry and oily, like a fire wait?ing to hap?pen. He didn't know if

their fail?ure to ride their hors?es in?to the canyon would put Lati?go's wind up or not,

and he didn't care. These were good mounts, fine Gilead stock, and over these last

months, Rush?er had be?come his friend. He would not take him or any of the hors?es

in?to the canyon, where they would be caught be?tween the fire and the thin?ny.

The boys were off the hors?es in a flash, Alain pulling the draw?string bag free of

his sad?dle-?horn and sling?ing it over one shoul?der. Cuth?bert's and Alain's hors?es ran

at once, whin?ny?ing, par?al?lel to the brush, but Rush?er lin?gered for a mo?ment,

look?ing at Roland. "Go on." Roland slapped him on the flank. "Run."

Rush?er ran, tail stream?ing out be?hind him. Cuth?bert and Alain slipped through the

break in the brush. Roland fol?lowed, glanc?ing down to make sure that the pow?der-

trail was still there. It was, and still dry—there had been not a

drop of rain since

the day they'd laid it.

"Cuthbert," he said. "Matchless."

Cuthbert gave him some. He was grinning so hard it was a wonder they hadn't

fallen out of his mouth. "We warmed up their day, didn't we, Roland? Aye!"

"We did, indeed," Roland said, grinning himself. "Go on, now. Back to that

chimney-cut."

"Let me do it," Cuthbert said. "Please, Roland, you go with Alain and let me stay.

I'm a firebug at heart, always have been."

"No," Roland said. "This part of it's mine. Don't argue with me. Go on. And tell

Alain to mind the wizard's glass, no matter what."

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded. "Don't wait too long."

"I won't."

"May your luck rise, Roland."

"May yours rise twice."

Cuthbert hurried away, boots rattling on the loose stone which carpeted the floor

of the canyon. He reached Alain, who lifted a hand to Roland. Roland nodded

back, then ducked as a bullet snapped close enough to his temple to flick his

hatbrim.

He crouched to the left of the opening in the brush and peered around, the wind

now striking full in his face. Latiago's men were closing rapidly. More rapidly than

he had expected. If the wind blew out the lucifers—

Never mind the ifs. Hold on, Roland. . . hold on... wait for them. . .

He held on, hunkering with an unlit match in each hand, now peering out through

a tangle of interlaced branches. The smell of mesquite was strong in his nostrils.

Not far behind it was the reek of burning oil. The drone of the thimble filled his

head, making him feel dizzy, a stranger to himself. He thought of how it had been

inside the pink storm, flying through the air ... how he had been snatched away

from his vision of Su san. Thank God for Sheemie, he thought dis?tant?ly. He'll

make sure she fin?ish?es the day some?place safe. But the craven whine of the thin?ny

seemed some?how to mock him, to ask him if there had been more to see.

Now Lati?go and his men were cross?ing the last three hun?dred yards to the canyon's

mouth at a full?out gal?lop, the ones be?hind clos?ing up fast. It would be hard for the

ones rid?ing point to stop sud?den?ly with?out the risk of be?ing rid?den down.

It was time. Roland stuck one of the lu?cifers be?tween his front teeth and raked it

for?ward. It lit, spilling one hot and sour spark on?to the wet bed of his tongue.

Be?fore the lu?cifer's head could bum away, Roland touched it to the pow?der in the

trench. It lit at once, run?ning left be?neath the north end of the brush in a bright

yel?low thread.

He lunged across the open?ing—which might be wide enough for two hors?es

run?ning flank to flank—with the sec?ond lu?cifer al?ready poised be?hind his teeth. He

struck it as soon as he was some?what blocked from the wind, dropped it in?to the

pow?der, heard the splut?ter?hiss, then turned and ran.

20

Moth?er and fa?ther, was Roland's first shocked thought—mem?ory so deep and

un?ex?pected it was like a slap. At Lake Sa?roni.

When had they gone there, to beau?ti?ful Lake Sa?roni in the north?ern part of Gilead

Barony? That Roland couldn't re?mem?ber. He knew on?ly that he had been very

small, and that there had been a beau?ti?ful stretch of sandy beach for him to play

on, per?fect for an as?pir?ing young cas?tle?builder such as he. That was what he had

been do?ing on one day of their

(va?ca?tion? was it a va?ca?tion? did my par?ents once up?on a time ac?tu al?ly take a

va?ca?tion?)

trip, and he had looked up, some?thing—maybe on?ly the cries

of the birds circling

over the lake—had made him look up, and there were his mother and father,

Steven and Gabrielle Deschain, at the water's edge, standing with their backs to

him and their arms around each other's waists, looking out at blue water beneath a

blue summer sky. How his heart had filled with love for them! How infinitely was

love, twining in and out of hope and memory like a braid with three strong strands,

so much the Bright Tower of every human's life and soul.

It wasn't love he felt now, however, but terror. The figures standing before him as

he ran back to where the canyon ended (where the rational part of the canyon

ended) weren't Steven of Gilead and Gabrielle of Arten but his mollies, Cuthbert

and Alain. They didn't have their arms around each other's waists, either, but their

hands were clasped, like the hands of fairy-tale children lost in a threatening fairy-

tale wood. Birds circled, but they were vultures, not gulls, and the shimmering,

mist-topped stuff before the two boys wasn't water.

It was the thinny, and as Roland watched, Cuthbert and Alain began to walk

toward it.

"Stop!" he screamed. "For your fathers' sakes, stop!"

They did not stop. They walked hand-in-hand toward the white-edged hem of the

smoky green shimmer. The thinny whined its pleasure, murmured endorsements,

promised rewards. It baked the nerves numb and picked at the brain.

There was no time to reach them, so Roland did the only thing he could think of:

raised one of his guns and fired it over their heads. The report was a hammer-

blow in the canyon's enclosure, and for a moment the ricochet whine was louder

than that of the thinny. The two boys stopped only inches from its sick shimmer.

Roland kept expecting it to reach out and grab them, as it had grabbed the low-

fly?ing bird when they had been here on the night of the Ped?
dler's Moon.

He trig?gered two more shots in?to the air, the re?ports hit?ting
the walls and rolling

back. "Gun?slingers!" he cried. "To me! To me!"

It was Alain who turned to?ward him first, his dazed eyes seem?
ing to float in his

dust?-streaked face. Cuth?bert con?tin?ued for?ward an?oth?er
step, the tips of his boots

dis?ap?pear?ing in the green?ish-?sil?ver froth at the edge of the
thin?ny (the whinge?ing

grum?ble of the thing rose half a note, as if in an?tic?ipa?tion),
and then Alain yanked

him back by the tugstring of his sombrero. Cuth?bert tripped
over a good?-sized

chunk of fall?en rock and land?ed hard. When he looked up, his
eyes had cleared.

"Gods!" he mur?mured, and as he scram?bled to his feet, Roland
saw that the toes of

his boots were gone, clipped off neat?ly, as if with a pair of gar?
den?ing shears. His

great toes stuck out.

"Roland," he gasped as he and Alain stum?bled to?ward him.
"Roland, we were

al?most gone. It talks!"

"Yes. I've heard it. Come on. There's no time."

He led them to the notch in the canyon wall, pray?ing that they
could get up quick

enough to avoid be?ing rid?dled with bul?lets ... as they cer
tain?ly would be, if Lati?go

ar?rived be?fore they could get up at least part of the way.

A smell, acrid and bit?ter, be?gan to fill the air—an odor like
boil?ing ju?niper berries.

And the first ten?drils of whitish-?gray smoke drift?ed past
them.

"Cuth?bert, you first. Alain, you next. I'll come last. Climb fast,
boys. Climb for

your lives."

21

Lati?go's men poured through the slot in the wall of brush like
wa?ter pour ing in?to a

fun?nel, grad?ual?ly widen?ing the gap as they came. The bot?
tom lay?er of the dead

veg?eta?tion was al?ready on fire, but in their ex?cite?ment
none of them saw these first

low flames, or marked them if they did. The pun?gent smoke al?so went un?noticed;

their noses had been dead?ened by the colos?sal stench of the burn?ing oil. Lati?go

him?self, in the lead with Hen?dricks close be?hind, had on?ly one thought; two words

that pound?ed at his brain in a kind of vi?cious tri?umph: Box canyon! Box canyon!

Box canyon!

Yet some?thing be?gan to in?trude on this mantra as he gal?loped deep?er in?to Eye?bolt,

his horse's hooves clat?ter?ing nim?bly through the scree of rocks and

(bones)

whitish piles of cow-?skulls and ribcages. This was a kind of low buzzing, a

mad?den?ing, slob?ber?ing whine, in?sec?tile and in?sis?tent. It made his eyes wa?ter. Yet,

strong as the sound was (if it was a sound; it al?most seemed to be com?ing from

in?side him), he pushed it aside, hold?ing on?to his mantra

(box canyon box canyon got em in a box canyon)

in?stead. He would have to face Wal?ter when this was over, per?haps Far?son

him?self, and he had no idea what his pun?ish?ment would be for los ing the tankers

... but all that was for lat?er. Now he want?ed on?ly to kill these in?ter?fer?ing bas?tards.

Up ahead, the canyon took a jog to the north. They would be be?yond that point,

and prob?ably not far be?yond, ei?ther. Backed up against the canyon's fi?nal wall,

try?ing to squeeze them?selves be?hind what fall?en rocks there might be. Lati?go

would mass what guns he had and drive them out in?to the open with ric?ochets.

They would prob?ably come with their hands up, hop?ing for mer?cy. They would

hope in vain. Af?ter what they'd done, the trou?ble they'd caused—

As Lati?go rode around the jog in the canyon's wall, al?ready lev?el?ling his pis?tol, his

horse screamed—like a wom?an, it screamed—and reared be?neath him. Lati?go

caught the sad?dle-?horn and man?aged to stay up, but the

horse's rear hooves slid

side?ways in the scree and the animal went down. Lati?go let go of the horn and

threw him?self clear, already aware that the sound which had been creep?ing in?to his

ears was sud?den?ly ten times stronger, buzzing loud enough to make his eye?balls

pulse in their sock?ets, loud enough to make his balls tin?gle un?pleas?ant?ly, loud

enough to blot out the mantra which had been beat?ing so in?sis?tent?ly in his head.

The in?sis?tence of the thin?ny was far, far greater than any George Lati?go could

have man?aged.

Hors?es flashed around him as he land?ed in a kind of sprawl?ing squat, hors?es that

were shoved for?ward willy?-?nil?ly by the on?com?ing press from be?hind, by rid?ers that

squeezed through the gap in pairs (then trios as the hole in the brush, now burn?ing

all along its length, widened) and then spread out again once they were past the

bot?tle?neck, none of them clear?ly re?al?iz?ing that the en?tire canyon was a bot?tle?neck.

Lati?go got a con?fused glimpse of black tails and gray forelegs and dap?pled

fet?locks; he saw chaps, and jeans, and boots jammed in?to stirrups. He tried to get

up and a horse?shoe clanged against the back of his skull. His hat saved him from

un?con?scious?ness, but he went heav?ily to his knees with his head down, like a man

who means to pray, his vi?sion full of stars and the back of his neck in?stant?ly

soaked with blood from the gash the pass?ing hoof had opened in his scalp.

Now he heard more scream?ing hors?es. Scream?ing men, as well. He got up again,

cough?ing out the dust raised by the pass?ing hors?es (such acrid dust, too; it clawed

his throat like smoke), and saw Hen?dricks try?ing to spur his horse south and east

against the on?com?ing tide of rid?ers. He couldn't do it. The rear third of the canyon

was some sort of swamp, filled with green?ish steam?ing wa?ter,

and there must be

quick?sand be?neath it, be cause Hen?dricks's horse seemed stuck. It screamed again,

and tried to rear. Its hindquar?ters slewed side?ways. Hen?dricks crashed his boots

in?to the an?imal's sides again and again, at?tempt?ing to get it in mo?tion, but the horse

didn't—or couldn't—move. That hun?gry buzzing sound filled Lati?go's ears, and

seemed to fill the world.

"Back! Turn back!"

He tried to scream the words, but they came out in what was lit?tle more than a

croak. Still the rid?ers pound?ed past him, rais?ing dust that was too thick to be on?ly

dust. Lati?go pulled in breath so he could scream loud?er—they had to go back,

some?thing was dread?ful?ly wrong in Eye?bolt Canyon—and hacked it out with?out

say?ing any?thing.

Scream?ing hors?es.

Reek?ing smoke.

And ev?erywhere, fill?ing the world like lu?na?cy, that whin?ing, whinge?ing, cringe?ing

buzz.

Hen?dricks's horse went down, eyes rolling, bit?part?ed teeth snap?ping at the smoky

air and splat?ter?ing curds of foam from its lips. Hen?dricks fell in?to the steam?ing

tag?nant wa?ter, and it wasn't wa?ter at all. It came alive, some?how, as he struck it;

grew green hands and a green, shifty mouth; pawed his cheek and melt?ed away the

flesh, pawed his nose and tore it off, pawed at his eyes and stripped them from

their sock?ets. It pulled Hen dricks un?der, but be?fore it did, Lati?go saw his de?nud?ed

jaw?bone, a bloody pis?ton to drive his scream?ing teeth.

Oth?er men saw, and tried to wheel away from the green trap. Those who man?aged

to do so in time were broad?sid?ed by the next wave of men—some of whom were,

in?cred?ibly, still yip?ping or bel?low?ing full?throat?ed bat?tle cries. More hors?es and

rid?ers were driv?en in?to the green shim?mer, which ac?cept?

ed them ea?ger?ly. Lati?go,

stand?ing stunned and bleed?ing like a man in the mid?dle of a
stam?pede (which was

ex?act?ly what he was), saw the sol?dier to whom he had giv?en
his gun. This fel?low,

who had obeyed Lati?go's or?der and shot one of his com?
padres in or?der to awak?en

the rest of them, threw him?self from his sad?dle, howl?ing, and
crawled back from

the edge of the green stuff even as his horse plunged in. He tried
to get to his feet,

saw two rid?ers bear?ing down on him, and clapped his hands
across his face. A

mo?ment lat?er he was rid?den down.

The shrieks of the wound?ed and dy?ing echoed in the smoky
canyon, but Lati?go

hard?ly heard them. What he heard most?ly was that buzzing, a
sound that was

al?most a voice. Invit?ing him to jump in. To end it here. Why
not? It was over,

wasn't it? All over.

He strug?gled away in?stead, and was now able to make some
head way; the stream

of rid?ers pack?ing its way in?to the canyon was eas?ing. Some
of the rid?ers fifty or

six?ty yards back from the jog had even been able to turn their
hors?es. But these

were ghost?ly and con?fused in the thick en?ing smoke.

The cun?ning bas?tards have set the brush on fire be?hind us.
Gods of heav?en, gods

of earth, I think we 're trapped in here.

He could give no com?mands—ev?ery time he drew in breath to
try, he coughed it

word?less?ly back out again—but he was able to grab a pass?ing
rid?er who looked all

of sev?en?teen and yank him out of his sad?dle. The boy went
down head?first and

smashed his brow open on a jut?ting chunk of rock. Lati?go was
mount?ed in his

place be?fore the kid's feet had stopped twitch?ing.

He jerked the horse's head around and spurred for the front of
the canyon, but the

smoke thick?ened to a chok?ing white cloud be?fore he got
more than twen?ty yards.

The wind was driv?ing it this way. Lati?go could make out—

bare?ly—the shift?ing

or?ange glare of the burn?ing brush at the desert end.

He wheeled his new horse back the way it had come. More hors?
es loomed out of

the fog. Lati?go crashed in?to one of them and was thrown for
the sec?ond time in

five min?utes. He land?ed on his knees, scram?bled to his feet,
and stag?gered back

down?wind, cough?ing and retch?ing, eyes red and stream?ing.

It was a lit?tle bet?ter be?yond the canyon's north?ward jog, but
wouldn't be for much

longer. The edge of the thin?ny was a tan?gle of milling hors?es,
many with bro?ken

legs, and crawl?ing, shriek?ing men. Lati?go saw sev er?al hats
float?ing on the

green?ish sur?face of the whin?ing or?gan?ism that filled the
back of the canyon; he

saw boots; he saw wristlets; he saw neck?er?chiefs; he saw the
bu?gle-?boy's dent?ed

in?stru?ment, still trail?ing its frayed strap.

Come in, the green shim?mer in?vit?ed, and Lati?go found its
buzz strange?ly at?trac?tive

... in?ti?mate, al?most. Come in and vis?it, squat and hun ker,
be at rest, be at peace,

be at one.

Lati?go raised his gun, mean?ing to shoot it. He didn't be?lieve
it could be killed, but

he would re?mem?ber the face of his fa?ther and go down
shoot?ing, all the same.

Ex?cept he didn't. The gun dropped from his re?lax?ing fin?gers
and he walked

for?ward—oth?ers around him were now do?ing the same—in?
to the thin?ny. The

buzzing rose and rose, fill?ing his ears un?til there was noth ing
else.

Noth?ing else at all.

22

They saw it all from the notch, where Roland and his friends
had stopped in a

strung-?out line about twen?ty feet be?low the top. They saw
the scream ing

con?fu?sion, the pan?icky milling, the men who were tram?pled,
the men and hors?es

that were driv?en in?to the thin?ny ... and the men who, at the
end, walked will?ing?ly

in?to it.

Cuth?bert was clos?est to the top of the canyon's wall, then
Alain, then Roland,

stand?ing on a six-?inch shelf of rock and hold?ing an out?crop
just above him. From

their van?tage-?point they could see what the men strug gling in
their smoky hell

be?low them could not: that the thin?ny was grow ing, reach?
ing out, crawl?ing

ea?ger?ly to?ward them like an in?com?ing tide.

Roland, his bat?tle-?lust slaked, did not want to watch what was
hap?pen?ing be?low,

but he couldn't turn away. The whine of the thin?ny— cow?ard?
ly and tri?umphant at

the same time, hap?py and sad at the same time, lost and found
at the same

time—held him like sweet, sticky ropes. He hung where he was,
hyp?no?tized, as

did his friends above him, even when the smoke be?gan to rise,
and its pun?gent

tang made him cough dry?ly.

Men shrieked their lives away in the thick?en?ing smoke be?
low. They strug?gled in it

like phan?toms. They fad?ed as the fog thick?ened, climb?ing
the canyon walls like

wa?ter. Hors?es whin?nied des?per?ate?ly from be?neath that
acrid white death. The wind

swirled its sur?face in prank?ish whirl pools. The thin?ny
buzzed, and above where it

lay, the sur?face of the smoke was stained a mys?tic shade of
palest green.

Then, at long last, John Far?son's men screamed no more. We
killed them, Roland

thought with a kind of sick and fas?ci?nat?ed hor?ror. Then: No,
not we. I. I killed

them.

How long he might have stayed there Roland didn't know—per?
haps un?til the

ris?ing smoke en?gulfed him as well, but then Cuth?bert, who
had be?gun to climb

again, called down three words from above him; called down in
a tone of sur?prise

and dis?may. "Roland! The moon!"

Roland looked up, star?tled, and saw that the sky had dark?ened
to a vel?vety pur?ple.

His friend was out?lined against it and look?ing east, his face
stained fever-?or?ange
with the light of the ris?ing moon.

Yes, or?ange, the thin?ny buzzed in?side his head. Laughed in?
side his head. Or?ange

as 'twas when it rose on the night you came out here to see me
and count me.

Or?ange like afire. Or?ange like a bon?fire.

How can it be al?most dark? he cried in?side him?self, but he
knew—yes, he knew

very well. Time had slipped back to?geth?er, that was all, like
lay ers of ground

em?brac?ing once more af?ter the ar?gu?ment of an earth?
quake. Twi?light had come.

Moon?rise had come.

Ter?ror struck Roland like a closed fist aimed at the heart, mak?
ing him jerk

back?ward on the small ledge he'd found. He groped for the
horn-?shaped out?crop

above him, but that act of re?bal?anc?ing was far away; most of
him was in?side the

pink storm again, be?fore he had been snatched away and
shown half the cos?mos.

Per?haps the wiz?ard's glass had on?ly shown him what stood
worlds far away in

or?der to keep from show?ing him what might soon be?fall so
close to home.

I'd turn around if I thought her life was in any re?al dan?ger, he
had said. In a

sec?ond.

And if the ball knew that? If it couldn't lie, might it not mis?di?
rect? Might it not

take him away and show him a dark land, a dark?er tow?er?
And it had shown him

some?thing else, some?thing that re?curred to him on?ly now: a
scrawny man in

farmer's over?alls who had said. . . what? Not quite what he'd
thought, not what he

had been used to hear?ing all his life; not Life for you and life
for your crop, but. . .

"Death," he whis?pered to the stones sur?round?ing him. "Death
for you, life for my

crop. Chary?ou tree. That's what he said, Chary?ou tree. Come,
Reap."

Or?ange, gun?slinger, a cracked old voice laughed in?side his

head. The voice of the

Coos. The color of bonfires. Charyou tree, fin de ano, these are the old ways of

which only the stuffy-guys with their red hands remain . . . until tonight. Tonight

the old ways are refreshed, as the old ways must be, from time to time. Charyou

tree, you damned baby, Charyou tree: tonight you pay for my sweet Ermot.

Tonight you pay for all. Come, Reap.

"Climb!" he screamed, reaching up and slapping Alain's behind. "Climb, climb!

For your father's sake, climb!"

"Roland, what—?" Alain's voice was dazed, but he did begin to climb, going from

handhold to handhold and rattling small pebbles down into Roland's upturned

face. Squinting against their fall, Roland reached and swatted Al's bottom again,

driving him like a horse.

"Climb, gods damn you!" he cried. "It mayn't be too late, even now!"

But he knew better. Demon Moon had risen, he had seen its orange light shining

on Cuthbert's face like delirium, and he knew better. In his head the lumatic buzz

of the thinny, that rotting sore eating through the flesh of reality, joined with the

lumatic laughter of the witch, and he knew better.

Death for you, life for the crop. Charyou tree.

Oh, Susan—

23

Nothing was clear to Susan until she saw the man with the long red hair and the

straw hat which did not quite obscure his lamb-slaughterer's eyes; the man with

the cornshucks in his hands. He was the first, just a farmer (she had glimpsed him

in the Lower Market, she thought; had even nodded to him, as countryfolk do,

and he back to her), standing by himself not far from the place where Silk Ranch

Road and the Great Road intersected, standing in the light of the rising moon.

Until they came upon him, nothing was clear; after he

hurled his bundle of

cornshucks at her as she passed, standing in the slowly rolling cart with her hands

bound in front of her and her head lowered and a rope around her neck, everything was clear.

"Char?you tree, " he called, almost sweetly uttering words of the Old People she

hadn't heard since her childhood, words that meant "Come, Reap" . . . and

something else, as well. Something hidden, something secret, something to do

with that root word, char, that word which meant only death. As the dried shucks

fluttered around her boots, she understood the secret very well; understood also

that there would be no baby for her, no wedding for her in the fairy-dis?tant land of

Gilead, no hall in which she and Roland would be joined and then saluted beneath

the electric lights, no husband, no more nights of sweet love; all that was over.

The world had moved on and all that was over, done before fairly begun.

She knew that she had been put in the back of the cart, stood in the back of the

cart, and that the surviving Coffin Hunter had looped a noose around her neck.

"Don't try to sit," he had said, sounding almost apologetic. "I have no desire to

choke you, girly. If the wagon bumps and you fall, I'll try to keep the knot loose,

but if you try to sit, I'll have to give you a pinching. Her orders." He nodded to

Rhea, who sat erect on the seat of the cart, the reins in her warped hands. "She's in charge now."

And so she had been; so, as they neared town, she still was. Whatever the

possession of her glam had done to her body, whatever the loss of it had done to

her mind, it had not broken her power; that seemed to have increased, if anything,

as if she'd found some other source from which she could feed, at least for awhile.

Men who could have broken her over one knee like a stick of
kin?dling fol?lowed

her com?mands as un?ques?tion?ing?ly as chil?dren.

There were more and more men as that Reap?ing af?ter?noon
wound its shal?low

course to night: half a dozen ahead of the cart, rid?ing with
Rimer and the man with

the cocked eye, a full dozen rid?ing be?hind it with Reynolds,
the rope lead?ing to her

neck wound around his tat?tooed hand, at their head. She didn't
know who these

men were, or how they had been sum?moned.

Rhea had tak?en this rapid?ly in?creas?ing par?ty north a lit?tle
far?ther, then turned

south?west on the old Silk Ranch Road, which wound back to?
ward town. On the

east?ern edge of Ham?bry, it re?joined the Great Road. Even in
her dazed state, Su?san

had re?al?ized the har?ri?dan was mov?ing slow?ly, mea sur?ing
the de?scent of the sun as

they went, not cluck?ing at the pony to hur?ry but ac?tu?al?ly
rein?ing it in, at least un?til

af?ter?noon's gold had gone. When they passed the farmer,
thin?-faced and alone, a

good man, no doubt, with a free?hold farm he worked hard from
first gleam to last

glow and a fam?ily he loved (but oh, there were those lamb?-
slaugh?ter?er eyes be?low

the brim of his bat?tered hat), she un?der?stood this leisure?ly
course of trav?el, too.

Rhea had been wait?ing for the moon.

With no gods to pray to, Su?san prayed to her fa?ther.

Da? If thee's there, help me to be strong as lean be, and help me
hold to him, to

the mem?ory of him. Help me to hold to my?self as well. Not for
res?cue, not for

sal?va?tion, but just so as not to give them the sat?is?fac?tion of
see?ing my pain and my

fear. And him, help him as well. . .

"Help keep him safe," she whis?pered. "Keep my love safe; take
my love safe to

where he goes, give him joy in who he sees, and make him a
cause of joy in those

who see him."

"Pray?ing, dearie?" the old wom?an asked with?out turn?ing on

the seat. Her croak?ing

voice oozed false com?pas?sion. “Aye, ye’d do well t’make things right with the

Pow?ers while ye still can—be?fore the spit’s burned right out of yer throat!” She

threw back her head and cack?led, the strag gling re?mains of her broom?straw hair

fly?ing out or?ange in the light of the bloat?ed moon.

24

Their hors?es, led by Rush?er, had come to the sound of Roland’s dis?mayed shout.

They stood not far away, their manes rip?pling in the wind, shak?ing their heads and

whin?ny?ing their dis?plea?sured when?ev?er the wind dropped enough for them to get a

whiff of the thick white smoke ris?ing from the canyon.

Roland paid no at?ten?tion to the hors?es or the smoke. His eyes were fixed on the

draw?string sack slung over Alain’s shoul?der. The ball in?side had come alive again;

in the grow?ing dark, the bag seemed to pulse like some weird pink fire?fly. He held

out his hands for it.

“Give it to me!”

“Roland, I don’t know if—”

“Give it to me, damn your face!”

Alain looked at Cuth?bert, who nod?ded . . . then lift?ed his hands sky ward in a

weary, dis?tract?ed ges?ture.

Roland tore the bag away be?fore Alain could do more than be?gin to shrug it off his

shoul?der. The gun?slinger dipped in?to it and pulled the glass out. It was glow?ing

fierce?ly, a pink De?mon Moon in?stead of an or ange one.

Be?hind and be?low them, the nag?ging whine of the thin?ny rose and fell, rose and

fell.

“Don’t look di?rect?ly in?to that thing,” Cuth?bert mut?tered to Alain. “Don’t, for your

fa?ther’s sake.”

Roland bent his face over the puls?ing ball, its light run?ning over his cheeks and

brow like liq?uid, drown?ing his eyes in its daz?zle.

In Maer?lyn’s Rain?bow he saw her—Su?san, horse?-drover’s daugh?ter, love?ly girl at

the win?dow. He saw her stand?ing in the back of a black cart
dec?orat?ed with gold

sym?bols, the old witch's cart. Reynolds rode be?hind her, hold?
ing the end of a rope

that was noosed around her neck. The cart was rolling to?ward
Green Heart,

mak?ing its way with pro?ces?sion?al slow-?ness. Hill Street was
lined with peo?ple of

whom the farmer with the lamb-?slaugh?ter?er's eyes had been
on?ly the first—all

those folk of Ham?bry and Mejis who had been de?prived of
their fair but were now

giv?en this an?cient dark at?trac?tion in its stead: Chary?ou
tree, come, Reap, death for

you, life for our crops.

A sound?less whis?per?ing ran through them like a gath?er?ing
wave, and they be?gan to

pelt her—first with corn?husks, then with rot?ting toma?toes,
then with pota?toes and

ap?ples. One of these lat?ter struck her cheek. She reeled, al?
most fell, then stood

straight again, now rais?ing her swollen but still love?ly face so
the moon paint?ed it.

She looked straight ahead.

“Chary?ou tree, ” they whis?pered. Roland couldn't hear them,
but he could see the

words on their lips. Stan?ley Ruiz was there, and Pet?tie, and
Gert Mog?gins, and

Frank Clay?pool, the deputy with the bro?ken leg; Jamie Mc?
Cann, who was to have

been this year's Reap Lad. Roland saw a hun dred peo?ple he
had known (and

most?ly liked) dur?ing his time in Mejis. Now these peo?ple
pelt?ed his love with

corn?shucks and veg?eta?bles as she stood, hands bound be?fore
her, in the back of

Rhea's cart.

The slow?ly rolling cart reached Green Heart, with its col?ored
pa?per lanterns and

silent carousel where no laugh?ing chil?dren rode ... no, not this
year. The crowd,

still speak?ing those two words—chant?ing them now, it ap?
peared—part?ed. Roland

saw the heaped pyra?mid of wood that was the un?lit bon?fire.
Sit?ting around it, their

backs propped on the cen?tral col umn, their lumpy legs out?
stretched, was a ring of

red-?hand?ed stuffy-?guys. There was a sin?gle hole in the ring;
a sin?gle wait?ing
va?can?cy.

And now a wom?an emerged from the crowd. She wore a rusty
black dress and

held a pail in one hand. A smear of ash stood out on one of her
cheeks like a

brand. She—

Roland be?gan to shriek. It was a sin?gle word, over and over
again:

No, no, no, no, no, no! The ball's pink light flashed brighter with
each rep?eti?tion,

as if his hor?ror re?freshed and strength?ened it. And now, with
each of those puls?es,

Cuth?bert and Alain could see the shape of the gun?slinger's
skull be?neath his skin.

"We have to take it away from him," Alain said. "We have to,
it's suck?ing him dry.

It's killing him!"

Cuth?bert nod?ded and stepped for?ward. He grabbed the ball,
but couldn't take it

from Roland's hands. The gun?slinger's fin?gers seemed weld?ed
to it.

"Hit him!" he told Alain. "Hit him again, you have to!"

But Alain might as well have been hit?ting a post. Roland didn't
even rock back on

his heels. He con?tin?ued to cry out that sin?gle neg?ative—
"No! No! No! No "—and

the ball flashed faster and faster, eat?ing its way in?to him
through the wound it had

opened, suck?ing up his grief like blood.

25

"Chary?ou tree!" Cordelia Del?ga?do cried, dart?ing for?ward
from where she had been

wait?ing. The crowd cheered her, and be?yond her left shoul?
der De?mon Moon

winked, as if in com?plic?ity. "Chary?ou tree, ye faith?less
bitch! Chary?ou tree!"

She flung the pail of paint at her niece, splat?ter?ing her pants
and dress?ing her tied

hands in a pair of wet scar?let gloves. She grinned up at Su?san
as the cart rolled

past. The smear of ash stood out on her cheek; in the cen?ter of

her pale fore?head, a

sin?gle vein pulsed like a worm.

“Bitch!” Cordelia screamed. Her fists were clenched; she danced a kind of

hi?lar?ious jig, feet jump?ing, bony knees pump?ing be?neath her skirt. “Life for the

crops! Death for the bitch! Chary?ou tree! Come, Reap!”

The cart rolled past her; Cordelia fad?ed from Su?san’s sight, just one more cru?el

phan?tasm in a dream that would soon end. Bird and bear and hare and fish, she

thought. Be safe, Roland; go with my love. That’s my fond?est wish.

“Take her!” Rhea screamed. “Take this mur?der?ing bitch and cook her red?hand?ed!

Chary?ou tree!”

“Chary?ou tree!” the crowd re?spond?ed. A for?est of will?ing hands grew in the

moon?lit air; some?where fire?crack?ers rat?tled and chil?dren laughed ex?cit?ed?ly.

Su?san was lift?ed from the cart and hand?ed to?ward the wait?ing wood pile above the

heads of the crowd, passed by up?lift?ed hands like a hero?ine re?turned tri?umphant?ly

home from the wars. Her hands dripped red tears up?on their strain?ing, ea?ger faces.

The moon over?looked it all, dwarf?ing the glow of the pa?per lanterns.

“Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she mur?mured as she was first low ered and

then slammed against the pyra?mid of dry wood, put in the place which had been

left for her—the whole crowd chant?ing in uni?son now, “Chary?ou TREE! Chary?ou

TREE! Chary?ou TREE!”

“Bird and bear and hare and fish.”

Try?ing to re?mem?ber how he had danced with her that night. Try?ing to re?mem?ber

how he had loved with her in the wil?low grove. Try?ing to re mem?ber that first

meet?ing on the dark road: Thankee?sai, we ‘re well met, he had said, and yes, in

spite of ev?ery?thing, in spite of this mis?er?able end ing with the folk who had been

her neigh?bors turned in?to pranc?ing gob?lins by moon?light,

in spite of pain and

be?tray?al and what was com?ing, he had spo?ken the truth:
they had been well met,

they had been very well met, in?deed.

“Chary?ou TREE! Chary?ou TREE! Chary?ou TREE!”

Wom?en came and piled dry corn?shucks around her feet. Sev?
er?al of them slapped

her (it didn’t mat?ter; her bruised and puffy face seemed to have
gone numb), and

one—it was Misha Al?varez, whose daugh?ter Su?san had taught
to ride—spat in?to

her eyes and then leaped prank?ish?ly away, shak?ing her hands
at the sky and

laugh?ing. For a mo?ment she saw Coral Thorin, fes?tooned
with reap?charms, her

arms filled with dead leaves which she threw at Su?san; they
flut?tered down around

her in a crack?ling, aro mat?ic show?er.

And now came her aunt again, and Rhea be?side her. Each held
a torch. They stood

be?fore her, and Su?san could smell siz?zling pitch.

Rhea raised her torch to the moon. “CHARY?OU TREE!” she
screamed in her rusty

old voice, and the crowd re?spond?ed, “CHARY?OU TREE!”

Cordelia raised her own torch. “COME, REAP!”

“COME, REAP!” they cried back to her.

“Now, ye bitch,” Rhea crooned. “Now comes warmer kiss?es
than any yer love

ev?er gave ye.”

“Die, ye faith?less,” Cordelia whis?pered. “Life for the crops,
death for you.”

It was she who first flung her torch in?to the corn?shucks which
were piled as high

as Su?san’s knees; Rhea flung hers a bare sec?ond lat?er. The
corn?shucks blazed up at

once, daz?zling Su?san with yel?low light.

She drew in a fi?nal breath of cool air, warmed it with her heart,
and loosed it in a

de?fi?ant shout: “ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!”

The crowd fell back, mur?mur?ing, as if un?easy at what they
had done, now that it

was too late to take it back; here was not a stuffy?-guy but a
cheer?ful girl they all

knew, one of their own, for some mad rea?son backed up
against the Reap?-Night

bon?fire with her hands paint?ed red. They might have saved her, giv?en an?oth?er
mo?ment—some might have, any?way—but it was too late. The dry wood caught;
her pants caught; her shirt caught; her long blonde hair blazed on her head like a
crown.

“ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!”

At the end of her life she was aware of heat but not pain. She had time to con?sider

his eyes, eyes of that blue which is the col?or of the sky at first light of morn?ing.

She had time to think of him on the Drop, rid?ing Rush?er flat?out with his black

hair fly?ing back from his tem?ples and his neck?er chief rip?pling; to see him

laugh?ing with an ease and free?dom he would nev?er find again in the long life

which stretched out for him be?yond hers, and it was his laugh?ter she took with her

as she went out, flee?ing the light and heat in?to the silky, con?sol?ing dark, call?ing to

him over and over as she went, call?ing bird and bear and hare and fish.

26

There was no word, not even no, in his screams at the end: he howled like a gut?ted

an?imal, his hands weld?ed to the ball, which beat like a run?away heart. He watched

in it as she burned.

Cuth?bert tried again to take the cursed thing away, and couldn't. He did the on?ly

oth?er thing he could think of—drew his re?volver, point?ed it at the ball, and

thumbed back the ham?mer. He would like?ly wound Roland, and the fly?ing glass

might even blind him, but there was no oth?er choice. If they didn't do some?thing,

the glam would kill him.

But there was no need. As if see?ing Cuth?bert's gun and un?der?stand?ing what it

meant, the ball went in?stant?ly dark and dead in Roland's hands. Roland's stiff

body, ev?ery line and mus?cle trem?bling with hor?ror and out rage, went limp. He

dropped like a stone, his fingers at last letting go of the ball.
His stomach

cushioned it as he struck the ground; it rolled off him and
trickled to a stop by one

of his limp, outstretched hands. Nothing burned in its darkness
now except for one

balleyful orange spark—the tiny reflection of the rising
Moon.

Alain looked at the glass with a species of disgust, frightened
awake; looked at it

as one might look at a vicious animal that now sleeps ... but
will wake again, and

bite when it does.

He stepped forward, meaning to crush it to powder beneath
his boot. “Don’t you

dare,” Cuthbert said in a hoarse voice. He was kneeling be-
side Roland’s limp form

but looking at Alain. The rising moon was in his eyes, two
small, bright stones of

light. “Don’t you dare, after all the misery and death we’ve
gone through to get it.

Don’t you even think of it.”

Alain looked at him uncertainly for a moment, thinking he
should destroy the

cursed thing, anyway—misery suffered did not justify mis-
ery to come, and as long

as the thing on the ground remained whole, misery was all it
would bring anyone.

It was a misery-machine, that was what it was, and it had
killed Susan Delgado.

He hadn’t seen what Roland had seen in the glass, but he had
seen his friend’s face,

and that had been enough. It had killed Susan, and it would kill
more, if left

whole.

But then he thought of Ka and drew back. Later he would bit-
terly regret doing so.

“Put it in the bag again,” Cuthbert said, “and then help me with
Roland. We have

to get out of here.”

The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the ground nearby, flut-
tering in the wind.

Alain picked up the ball, hating the feel of its smooth, curved
surface, expecting it

to come alive under his touch. It didn’t, though. He put it in the

bag, and looped it

over his shoulder again. Then he knelt beside Roland.

He didn't know how long they tried unsuccessfully to bring him around—until the

moon had risen high enough in the sky to turn silver again, and the smoke roiling

out of the canyon had begun to dissipate, that was all he knew. Until Cuthbert told

him it was enough; they would have to sling him over Rusher's saddle and ride

with him that way. If they could get into the heavily forested lands west of Barony

before dawn, Cuthbert said, they would likely be safe . . . but they had to get at

least that far. They had smashed Parson's men apart with stunning ease, but the

remains would likely knit together again the following day. Best they be gone

before that happened.

And that was how they left Eyebolt Canyon, and the sea-coast side of Mejis; riding

west beneath the Demon Moon, with Roland laid across his saddle like a corpse.

27

The next day they spent in El Bosque, the forest west of Mejis, waiting for Roland

to wake up. When afternoon came and he remained unconscious, Cuthbert said:

"See if you can touch him."

Alain took Roland's hands in his own, marshalled all his concentration, bent over

his friend's pale, slumbering face, and remained that way for almost half an hour.

Finally he shook his head, let go of Roland's hands, and stood up.

"Nothing?" Cuthbert asked.

Alain sighed and shook his head.

They made a travois of pine branches so he wouldn't have to spend another night

riding over saddle (if nothing else, it seemed to make Rusher nervous to be

carrying his master in such a way), and went on, not traveling on the Great

Road—that would have been far too dangerous—but parallel to it. When Roland

re?mained un?con?scious the fol?low?ing day (Mejis falling be?hind them now, and both

boys feel?ing a deep tug of home?sick ness, in?ex?pli?ca?ble but as re?al as tides), they

sat on ei?ther side of him, look ing at each oth?er over the slow rise and fall of his

chest.

“Can an un?con?scious per?son starve, or die of thirst?” Cuth?bert asked. “They can’t,

can they?”

“Yes,” Alain said. “I think they can.”

It had been a long, nerve-?wrack?ing night of trav?el. Nei?ther boy had slept well the

pre?vi?ous day, but on this one they slept like the dead, with blan?kets over their

heads to block the sun. They awoke min?utes apart as the sun was go?ing down and

De?mon Moon, now two nights past the full, was ris?ing through a trou?bled rack of

clouds that pre?saged the first of the great au?tumn storms.

Roland was sit?ting up. He had tak?en the glass from the draw?string bag. He sat with

it cra?dled in his arms, a dark?ened bit of mag?ic as dead as the glass eyes of The

Romp. Roland’s own eyes, al?so dead, looked in?dif fer?ent?ly off in?to the moon?lit

cor?ri?dors of the for?est. He would eat but not sleep. He would drink from the

streams they passed but not speak. And he would not be part?ed from the piece of

Maer?lyn’s Rain?bow which they had brought out of Mejis at such great price. It did

not glow for him, how?ev?er. Not, Cuth?bert thought once, while Al and I are awake

to see it, any?way.

Alain couldn’t get Roland’s hands off the ball, and so he laid his own on Roland’s

cheeks, touch?ing him that way. Ex?cept there was noth?ing to touch, noth?ing there.

The thing which rode west with them to?ward Gilead was not Roland, or even a

ghost of Roland. Like the moon at the close of its cy?cle, Roland had gone.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART FOUR

ALL GOD'S
CHILLUN GOT
SHOES
CHAP?TER I
KANSAS IN
THE MORN?ING

1

For the first time in
(hours? days?)

the gun?slinger fell silent. He sat for a mo?ment look?ing to?
ward the build?ing to the

east of them (with the sun be?hind it, the glass palace was a
black shape sur?round?ed

by a gold nim?bus) with his fore?arms propped on his knees.
Then he took the

wa?ter?skin which lay on the pave?ment be?side him, held it
over his face, opened his

mouth, and up?end?ed it.

He drank what hap?pened to go in his mouth—the oth?ers could
see his adam's

ap?ple work?ing as he lay back in the break?down lane, still
pour ing—but drink?ing

didn't seem to be his pri?ma?ry pur?pose. Wa?ter streamed
down his deeply lined

fore?head and bounced off his closed eye?lids. It pooled in the
tri?an?gu?lar hol?low at

the base of his throat and ran back from his tem?ples, wet?ting
his hair and turn?ing it

dark?er.

At last he put the wa?ter?skin aside and on?ly lay there, eyes
closed, arms stretched

out high above his head, like a man sur?ren?der?ing in his sleep.
Steam rose in

del?icate ten?drils from his wet face.

"Ah?hh," he said.

"Feel bet?ter?" Ed?die asked.

The gun?slinger's lids rose, dis?clos?ing those fad?ed yet some?
how alarm?ing blue eyes.

"Yes. I do. I don't un?der?stand how that can be, as much as I
dread?ed this telling . . .

but I do."

"An ol?ogist-?of-?the-?psy?che could prob?ably ex?plain it to

you,” Su?san nah said, “but I

doubt you’d lis?ten.” She put her hands in the small of her back, stretched and

wincen ... but the wince was on?ly re?flex. The pain and stiff?ness she’d ex?pected

weren’t there, and al?though there was one small creak near the base oth?er spine,

she didn’t get the sat?is?fy?ing se?ries of snaps, crack?les, and pops she had ex?pected.

“Tell you one thing,” Ed?die said, “this gives a whole new mean?ing to ‘Get it off

your chest.’ How long have we been here, Roland?”

“Just one night.”

“ ‘The spir?its have done it all in a sin?gle night,’ ” Jake said in a dreamy voice. His

legs were crossed at the an?kles; Oy sat in the di?amond shape made by the boy’s

bent knees, look?ing at him with his bright gold-?black eyes.

Roland sat up, wip?ing at his wet cheeks with his neck?er?chief and look?ing at Jake

sharply. “What is it you say?”

“Not me. A guy named Charles Dick?ens wrote that. In a sto?ry called A Christ?mas

Car?ol. All in a sin?gle night, huh?”

“Does any part of your body say it was longer?”

Jake shook his head. No, he felt pret?ty much the way he did any morn?ing—bet?er

than on some. He had to take a leak, but his back teeth weren’t ex?act?ly float?ing, or

any?thing like that.

“Ed?die? Su?san?nah?”

“I feel good,” Su?san?nah said. “Sure?ly not as if I stayed up all night, let alone many

of em.”

Ed?die said, “It re?minds me of the time I spent as a junkie, in a way—”

“Doesn’t ev?ery?thing?” Roland asked dry?ly.

“Oh, that’s fun?ny,” Ed?die said. “A re?al howl. Next train that goes crazy on us, you

can ask it the sil?ly ques?tions. What I meant was that you’d spend so many nights

high that you got used to feel?ing like ten pounds of shit in a nine-?pound bag when

you got up in the morn?ing—bad head, stuffy nose, thump?ing heart, glass in the old

spine. Take it from your pal Ed?die, you can tell just from the way you feel in the

morn?ing how good dope is for you. Any?way, you'd get so used to that—/did,

any way—that when you ac?tu?al?ly took a night off, you'd wake up the next

morn?ing and sit there on the edge of the bed, think?ing, 'What the flick's wrong

with me? Am I sick? I feel weird. Did I have a stroke in the night?' "

Jake laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth so vi?olent?ly that it was as if he

want?ed not just to hold the sound in but call it back. "Sor?ry," he said. "That made

me think of my dad."

"One of my peo?ple, huh?" Ed?die said. "Any?way, I ex?pect to be sore, I ex?pect to be

tired, I ex?pect to creak when I walk... but I ac?tu?al?ly think all I need to put me right

is a quick pee in the bush?es."

"And a bite to eat?" Roland asked.

Ed?die had been wear?ing a ^mall smile. Now it fad?ed. "No," he said. "Af?ter that

sto?ry, I'm not all that hun?gry. In fact, I'm not hun?gry at all."

2

Ed?die car?ried Su?san?nah down the em?bank?ment and popped her be?hind a stand of

lau?rel bush?es to do her nec?es?sary. Jake was six?ty or sev?en?ty yards east, in a grove

of birch?es. Roland had said he would use the re?me?di?al strip to do his morn?ing

nec?es?sary, then raised his eye?brows when his New York friends laughed.

Su?san?nah wasn't laugh?ing when she came out of the bush?es. Her face was streaked

with tears. Ed?die didn't ask her; he knew. He had been fight ing the feel?ing

him?self. He took her gen?tly in his arms and she put her face against the side of his

neck. They stayed that way for a lit?tle while.

"Chary?ou tree, " she said at last, pro?nounc?ing it as Roland had: chair-?you tree,

with a lit?tle up?turned vow?el at the end.

"Yeah," Ed?die said, think?ing that a Char?lie by any oth?er name was still a Char?lie.

As, the sup?posed, a rose was a rose was a rose. "Come, Reap."

She raised her head and be?gan to wipe her swim?ming eyes.
"To have gone through
all that," she said, keep?ing her voice low ... and look?ing once
at the turn?pike
em?bank?ment to make sure Roland wasn't there, look ing down
at them. "And at
four?teen."

"Yeah. It makes my ad?ven?tures search?ing for the elu?sive
dime bag in Tomp?kins

Square look pret?ty tame. In a way, though, I'm al?most re?
lieved."

"Re?lieved? Why?"

"Be?cause I thought he was go?ing to tell us that he killed her
him?self. For his
damned Tow?er."

Su?san?nah looked square?ly in?to his eyes. "But he thinks
that's what he did. Don't
you un?der?stand that?"

3

When they were back to?geth?er again and there was food ac?
tu?al?ly in sight, all of

them de?cid?ed they could eat a bit, af?ter all. Roland shared
out the last of the

bur?ri?tos (Maybe lat?er to?day we can stop in at the near?est
Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers

and see what they've got for left?overs, Ed?die thought), and
they dug in. All of

them, that was, ex?cept Roland. He picked up his bur?ri?to,
looked at it, then looked

away. Ed?die saw an ex?pres?sion of sad?ness on the gun?
slinger's face that made him

look both old and lost. It hurt Ed die's heart, but he couldn't
think what to do about
it.

Jake, al?most ten years younger, could. He got up, went to
Roland, knelt be?side

him, put his arms around the gun?slinger's neck, and hugged
him. "I'm sor?ry you
lost your friend," he said.

Roland's face worked, and for a mo?ment Ed?die was sure he
was go ing to lose it.

A long time be?tween hugs, maybe. Mighty long. Ed?die had to
look away for a

mo?ment. Kansas in the morn?ing, he told him?self. A sight you

nev?er ex?pect?ed to

see. Dig on that for awhile, and let the man be.

When he looked back, Roland had it to?geth?er again. Jake was sit?ting be?side him,

and Oy had his long snout on one of the gun?slinger's boots. Roland had be?gun to

eat his bur?ri?to. Slow?ly, and with?out much rel?ish . . . but he was eat?ing.

A cold hand—Su?san?nah's—crept in?to Ed?die's. He took it and fold?ed his fin?gers

over it.

"One night," she mar?velled.

"On our body?-?clocks, at least," Ed?die said. "In our heads . . ."

"Who knows?" Roland agreed. "But sto?ry?telling al?ways changes time. At least it

does in my world." He smiled. It was un?ex?pect?ed, as al ways, and as al?ways, it

trans?formed his face in?to some?thing near?ly beau?ti ful. Look?ing at that, Ed?die

mused, you could see how a girl might have fall?en in love with Roland, once up?on

a time. Back when he had been long and go?ing on tall but maybe not so ug?ly; back

when the Tow?er hadn't yet got its best hold on him.

"I think it's that way in all worlds, sug?ar," Su?san?nah said. "Could I ask you a

cou?ple of ques?tions, be?fore we get rolling?"

"If you like."

"What hap?pened to you? How long were you ... gone?"

"I was cer?tain?ly gone, you're right about that. I was trav?el?ling. Wan de?ring. Not in

Maer?lyn's Rain?bow, ex?act?ly ... I don't think I ev?er would have re?turned from there,

if I'd gone in?to it while I was still . . . sick . . . but ev?ery?one has a wiz?ard's glass, of

course. Here." He tapped his fore head grave?ly, just above the space be?tween his

eye?brows. "That's where I went. That's where I trav?elled while my friends

trav?elled east with me. I got bet?ter there, lit?tle by lit?tle. I held on?to the ball, and I

trav?elled in?side my head, and I got bet?ter. But the glass nev?er glowed for me un?til

the very end ... when the bat?tle?ments of the cas?tle and the tow?ers of the city were

ac?tu?al?ly in sight. If it had awak?ened ear?li?er...”

He shrugged.

“If it had awak?ened be?fore I’d start?ed to get some of my strength of mind back, I

don’t think I’d be here now. Be?cause any world—even a pink one with a glass

sky—would have been prefer?able to one where there was no Su?san. I sup?pose the

force that gives the glass its life knew that... and wait?ed.”

“But when it did glow for you again, it told you the rest,” Jake said. “It must have.

It told you the parts that you weren’t there to see.”

“Yes. I know as much of the sto?ry as I do be?cause of what I saw in the ball.”

“You told us once that John Far?son want?ed your head on a pole,” Ed die said.

“Be?cause you stole some?thing from him. Some?thing he held dear. It was the glass

ball, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. He was more than fu?ri?ous when he found out. He was in?sane with rage. In

your par?lance, Ed?die, he ‘went nu?cle?ar.’ ”

“How many more times did it glow for you?” Su?san?nah asked.

“And what hap?ened to it?” Jake added.

“I saw in it three times af?ter we left Mejis Barony,” Roland said. “The first was on

the night be?fore we came home to Gilead. That was when I trav?elled in it the

longest, and it showed me what I’ve told you. A few things I’ve on?ly guessed at,

but most I was shown. It showed me these things not to teach or en?light?en, but to

hurt and wound. The re?main?ing pieces of the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow are all evil things.

Hurt en?livens them, some?how. It wait?ed un?til my mind was strong enough to

un?der?stand and with?stand... and then it showed me all the things I missed in my

stu pid ado?les?cent com?pla?cen?cy. My lovesick daze. My pride?ful, mur?der?ous

con?ceit.”

“Roland, don’t,” Su?san?nah said. “Don’t let it hurt you still.”

“But it does. It al?ways will. Nev?er mind. It doesn’t mat?ter now; that tale is told.

”The sec?ond time I saw in?to the glass—went in?to the glass—

was three days af?ter I

came home. My moth?er wasn't there, al?though she was due that evening. She had

gone in?to De?baria—a kind of re?treat for wom?en—to wait and pray for my re?turn.

Nor was Marten there. He was in Cres?sia, with Far?son.“

”The ball,” Ed?die said. ”Your fa?ther had it by then?”

”No-o,” Roland said. He looked down at his hands, and Ed?die observed a faint

flush ris?ing in?to his cheeks. ”I didn't give it to him at first. I found it... hard to give

up.“

”I bet,” Su?sannah said. ”You and ev?ery?one else who ev?er looked in?to the god?dam

thing.“

”On the third af?ter?noon, be?fore we were to be ban?quet?ed to cel?ebrate our safe

re?turn“

”I bet you were re?al?ly in a mood to par?ty, too,” Ed?die said.

Roland smiled with?out hu?mor, still study?ing his hands. ”At around four o' the

clock, Cuth?bert and Alain came to my rooms. We were a trio for an artist to paint,

I wot—wind?burned, hol?low-?eyed, hands cov?ered with heal?ing cuts and scrapes

from our climb up the side of the canyon, scrawny as scare?crows. Even Alain, who

tend?ed to?ward stout?ness, all but dis?ap?peared when he turned side?ways. They

con?front?ed me, I sup?pose you'd say. They'd kept the se?cret of the ball to that

point—out of re?spect for me and for the loss I'd suf?fered, they told me, and I

be?lieved them— but they would keep it no longer than that night's meal. If I

wouldn't give it up vol?un?tar?ily, it would be a ques?tion for our fa?thers to de?cide.

They were hor?ri?bly em?bar?rassed, es?pe?cial?ly Cuth?bert, but they were de?ter?mined.

”I told them I'd give it over to my own fa?ther be?fore the ban?quet— be?fore my

moth?er ar?rived by coach from De?baria, even. They should come ear?ly and see that

I kept my promise. Cuth?bert start?ed to hem and haw and say that wouldn't be

necessary, but of course it was necessary—“

“Yeah,” Ed died said. He had the look of a man who understood this part of the story

perfectly. “You can go into the crap on your own, but it’s a lot easier to act usually

flush all the bad shit down the toilet if you have somebody with you.”

“Alain, at least, knew it would be better for me—easier—if I didn’t have to hand

the ball over alone. He hushed Cuthbert up and said they’d be there. And they

were. And I gave it over, little as I wanted to. My father went as pale as paper

when he looked into the bag and saw what was there, then excused himself and

took it away. When he came back, he picked up his glass of wine and went on

talking to us of our adventures in Mejis as if nothing had happened.”

“But between the time your friends talked to you about it and the time you gave it

up, you looked into it,” Jake said. “Went into it. Travelled in it. What did it show

you that time?”

“First the Tower again,” Roland said, “and the beginning of the way there. I saw

the fall of Gilead, and the triumph of the Good Man. We’d put those things back a

mere twenty months or so by destroying the tankers and the oilpatch. I could do

nothing about that, but it showed me something I could do. There was a certain

knife. The blade had been treated with an especially potent poison, something

from a distant Mid-World Kingdom called Garlan. Stuff so strong even the tiniest

cut would cause almost instant death. A wandering singer—in truth, John Parson’s

eldest nephew—had brought this knife to court. The man he gave it to was the

caszle’s chief of domestic staff. This man was to pass the knife on to the usually

assassin. My father was not meant to see the sun come up on the morning after the

banquet.” He smiled at them grimly. “Because of what I saw

in the Wiz?ard's Glass,

the knife nev?er reached the hand that would have used it, and there was a new

chief of do?mes?tics by the end of that week. These are pret?ty tales I tell you, are

they not? Aye, very pret?ty, in?deed."

"Did you see the per?son the knife was meant for?" Su?san?nah asked. "The ac?tu?al

killer?"

"Yes."

"Any?thing else? Did you see any?thing else?" Jake asked. The plan to mur?der

Roland's fa?ther didn't seem to hold much in?ter?est for him.

"Yes." Roland looked puz?zled. "Shoes. Just for a minute. Shoes tum bling through

the air. At first I thought they were au?tumn leaves. And when I saw what they

re?al?ly were, they were gone and I was ly?ing on my bed with the ball hugged in my

arms . . . pret?ty much the way I car?ried it back from Mejis. My fa?ther ... as I've

said, his sur?prise when he looked in?side the bag was very great, in?deed."

You told him who had the knife with the spe?cial poi?son on it, Su?san nah thought,

Jeeves the But?ler, or who?ev?er, but you didn't tell him who was sup?posed to

ac?tu?al?ly use it, did you, sug?ar? Why not? Be?cause you want?ed to take care of dat

lit?tle spot o' work yo own?self? But be?fore she could ask, Ed?die was ask?ing a

ques?tion of his own.

"Shoes? Fly?ing through the air? Does that mean any?thing to you now?"

Roland shook his head.

"Tell us about the rest of what you saw in it," Su?san?nah said.

He gave her a look of such ter?ri?ble pain that what Su?san?nah had on?ly sus?pected

im?me?di?ate?ly so?lid?ified to fact in her mind. She looked away from him and groped

for Ed?die's hand.

"I cry your par?don, Su?san?nah, but I can?not. Not now. For now, I've told all I can."

"All right," Ed?die said. "All right, Roland, that's cool."

"Ool," Oy agreed.

"Did you ever see the witch again?" Jake asked.

For a long time it seemed Roland would not answer this, either, but in the end he did.

"Yes. She wasn't done with me. Like my dreams of Susan, she followed me. All

the way from Mejis, she followed me."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked in a low, awed voice. "Cripes, Roland, what do you mean?"

"Not now." He got up. "It's time we were on our way again." He nodded to the

building which floated ahead of them; the sun was just now clearing its

battements. "Yonder's a good distance away, but I think we can reach it

this afternoon, if we move brisk. 'Twould be best. It's not a place I'd reach after

nightfall, if that can be avoided."

"Do you know what it is yet?" Susanah asked.

"Trouble," he repeated. "And in our road."

4

For awhile that morning, the thinny warbled so loudly that not even the bullets in

their ears would entirely stop up the sound; at its worst, Susanah felt as if the

bridge of her nose would simply disintegrate, and when she looked at Jake, she

saw he was weeping copiously—not crying the way people do when they're sad,

but the way they do when their sins are in total revolt. She couldn't get the saw-

player the kid had mentioned out of her mind. Sounds Hawaiian, she thought over

and over again as Eddie pushed her grimly along in the new wheelchair, weaving

in and out of the stalled vehicles. Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Sounds fucking

Hawaiian, doesn't it. Miss Oh So Black and Pretty?

On both sides of the turnpike the thinny lapped all the way up to the embankment,

casting its twitching, misshapen reflections of trees and grain elevators, seeming to

watch the piggrims pass as hungry animals in a zoo might watch plump children.

Su?san?nah would find her?self think?ing of the thin?ny in Eye? bolt Canyon, reach?ing

out hun?gri?ly through the smoke for Lati?go's milling men, pulling them in (and

some go?ing in on their own, walk?ing like zom?bies in a hor?ror movie), and then she

would find her?self think?ing of the guy in Cen?tral Park again, the wacko with the

saw. Sounds Hawai?ian, doesn't it? Count?ing one thin?ny, and it sounds Hawai ian,

doesn't it?

Just when she thought she could stand it not a mo?ment longer, the thin?ny be?gan to

draw back from 1-70 again, and its hum?ming war?ble at last be?gan to fade.

Su?san?nah was even?tu?al?ly able to pull the bul?lets out of her ears. She tucked them

in?to the side?-pock?et of her chair with a hand that shook slight?ly.

"That was a bad one," Ed?die said. His voice sound?ed clogged and weepy. She

looked around at him and saw his cheeks were wet, his eyes red. "Take it easy,

Suzie?-pie," he said. "It's my si?nus?es, that's all. That sound kills em."

"Me, too," Su?san?nah said.

"My si?nus?es are okay, but my head aches," Jake said. "Roland, do you have any

more as?pirin?"

Roland stopped, rum?maged, and found the bot?tle.

"Did you ev?er see Clay Reynolds again?" Jake asked, af?ter swal?low ing the pills

with wa?ter from the skin he car?ried.

"No, but I know what hap?pened to him. He got a bunch to?geth?er, some of them

de?sert?ers from Par?son's army, went to rob?bing banks ... in to?ward our part of the

world, this was, but by then bank?-thieves and stage?-rob?bers didn't have much to

fear from gun?slingers."

"The gun?slingers were busy with Far?son," Ed?die said.

"Yes. But Reynolds and his men were trapped by a smart sher?iff who turned the

main street of a town called Oak?ley in?to a killing?-zone. Six of the ten in the gang

were killed out?right. The rest were hung. Reynolds was one of those. This was less

than a year later, during the time of Wide Earth.” He paused, then said: “One of

those shot dead in the killing-zone was Coral Thorin. She had become Reynolds’s

woman; rode and killed with the rest of them.”

They went on in silence for a bit. In the distance, the thinning warbled its endless

song. Jake suddenly ran ahead to a parked camper. A note had been left under the

wiper blade on the driver’s side. By standing on his toes, he was just able to reach

it. He scanned it, frowning.

“What does it say?” Eddie asked.

Jake handed it over. Eddie looked, then passed it to Susanah, who read it in turn

and gave it to Roland. He looked, then shook his head. “I can make out only a few

words—old woman, dark man. What does the rest say? Read it to me.”

Jake took it back. “ ‘The old woman from the dreams is in Nebraska. Her name is

Abaigail.’ ” He paused. “Then, down here, it says, ‘The dark man is in the west.

Maybe Vegas.’ ”

Jake looked up at the gunslinger, the note fluttering in his hand, his face puzzled

and uneasy. But Roland was looking toward the palace which shimmered across

the highway—the palace that was not in the west but in the east, the palace that

was light, not dark.

“In the west,” Roland said. “Dark man, Dark Tower, and all ways in the west.”

“Nebraska’s west of here, too,” Susanah said hesitantly. “I don’t know if that

matters, this Abigail person, but...”

“I think she’s part of another story,” Roland said.

“But a story close to this one,” Eddie put in. “Next door, maybe. Close enough to

swap sugar for salt... or start arguments.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Roland said, “and we may have business with the ‘old

woman’ and the ‘dark man’ yet... but today our business is

east. Come on."

They be?gan walk?ing again.

5

"What about Sheemie?" Jake asked af?ter awhile.

Roland laughed, part?ly in sur?prise at the ques?tion, part?ly in pleased re?mem?brance.

"He fol?lowed us. It couldn't have been easy for him, and it must have been

damned scary in places—there were wheels and wheels of wild coun?try be?tween

Mejis and Gilead, and plen?ty of wild folks, too. Worse than just folks, may?hap.

But ka was with him, and he showed up in time for Year's End Fair. He and that

damned mule."

"Capi," Jake said.

"Ap?py," Oy re?peat?ed, padding along at Jake's heel.

"When we went in search of the Tow?er, I and my friends, Sheemie was with us.

As a sort of squire, I sup?pose you'd say. He . . ." But Roland trailed off, bit?ing at

his lip, and of that he would say no more.

"Cordelia?" Su?san?nah asked. "The crazy aunt?"

"Dead be?fore the bon?fire had burned down to em?bers. It might have been a heart-

storm, or a brain-?storm—what Ed?die calls a stroke."

"Per?haps it was shame," Su?san?nah said. "Or hor?ror at what she'd done."

"It may have been," Roland said. "Wak?ing to the truth when it's too late is a

ter?ri?ble thing. I know that very well."

"Some?thing up there," Jake said, point?ing at a long stretch of road from which the

cars had been cleared. "Do you see?"

Roland did—with his eyes he seemed to see ev?ery?thing—but it was an?oth?er fif?teen

min?utes or so be?fore Su?san?nah be?gan to pick up the small black specks ahead in

the road. She was quite sure she knew what they were, al?though what she thought

was less vi?sion than in?tu?ition. Ten min utes af?ter that, she was sure.

They were shoes. Six pairs of shoes placed neat?ly in a line across the east?bound

lanes of In?ter?state 70.

They reached the shoes at mid-morn?ing. Be?yond them, clear?
er now, stood the

glass palace. It glim?mered a del?icate green shade, like the re?
flec?tion of a lily pad in

still wa?ter. There were shin?ing gates in front of it; red pen
nons snapped from its

tow?ers in a light breeze.

The shoes were al?so red.

Su?sana?h's im?pres?sion that there were six pairs was un?der?
stand?able but

wrong—there were ac?tu?al?ly four pairs and one quar?tet. This
lat?ter— four dark red

booties made of sup?ple leather—was un?doubt?ed?ly meant for
the four-foot?ed

mem?ber of their ka-tet. Roland picked one of them up and felt
in?side it. He didn't

know how many bum?blers had worn shoes in the his?to?ry of
the world, but he was

will?ing to guess that none had ev?er been gift?ed with a set of
silk-lined leather

booties.

"Bal?ly, Guc?ci, eat your heart out," Ed?die said. "This is great
stuff."

Su?sana?h's were eas?iest to pick out, and not just be?cause of
the fe?mi nine, spark?ly

swoops on the sides. They weren't re?al?ly shoes at all—they
had been made to fit

over the stumps of her legs, which end?ed just above the knees.

"Now look at this," she mar?velled, hold?ing one up so the sun
could flash on the

rhine?stones with which the shoes were dec?orat?ed ... if they
were rhine?stones. She

had a crazy no?tion that maybe they were di?amond chips.
"Cap?pies. Af?ter four

years of get?tin along in what my friend Cyn thia calls 'cir?cum?
stances of re?duced

leg-room,' I fi?nal?ly got my?self a pair of cap?pies. Think of
that."

"Cap?pies," Ed?die mused. "Is that what they call em?"

"That's what they call em, sug?ar."

Jake's were bright red Ox?fords—ex?cept for the col?or, they
would have looked

perfectly at home in the well-bred classrooms of The Piper School. He flexed one,

then turned it over. The sole was bright and unmarked. There was no

manufacturer's stamp, nor had he really expected one. His father had maybe a

dozen pairs of fine handmade shoes. Jake knew them when he saw them.

Edie's were low boots with Cuban heels {Maybe in this world you call them

Mejis heels, he thought) and pointed toes ... what, back in his other life, had been

known as "street-boppers." Kids from the mid-sixties—an era

Odetta/Detta/Susanah had just missed—might have called them "Beatle-boots."

Roland's, of course, were cowboy boots. Fancy ones—you'd go dancing rather

than driving in such as these. Looped stitching, side decorations, narrow, haughty

arches. He examined them without picking them up, then looked at his fellow

travelers and frowned. They were looking at each other. You would have said

three people couldn't do that, only a pair ... but you only would have said it if

you'd never been part of a quartet.

Roland still shared khaf with them; he felt the powerful current of their mingled

thought, but could not understand it. Because it's of their world. They come from

different whens of that world, but they see some thing here that's common to all

three of them.

"What is it?" he asked. "What do they mean, these shoes?"

"I don't think any of us know that, exactly," Susanah said.

"No," Jake said. "It's another riddle." He looked at the weird, blood red Oxford

shoe in his hands with distaste. "Another god-damned riddle."

"Tell what you know." He looked toward the glass palace again. It was perhaps

fifteen New York miles away, now, shining in the clear day, delicate as a mirage,

but as real as ... well, as real as shoes. "Please, tell me what

you know about these shoes."

"I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's chillun got shoes," Odet?ta said. "That's the pre?vailin opin?ion, any?way."

"Well," Ed?die said, "we got em, any?way. And you're think?ing what I'm think?ing, aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"You, Jake?"

In?stead of an?swer?ing with words, Jake picked up the oth?er Ox?ford (Roland had no

doubt that all the shoes, in?clud?ing Oy's, would fit per fect?ly) and clapped them

briskly to?geth?er three times. It meant noth?ing to Roland, but both Ed?die and

Su?san?nah re?act?ed vi?olent?ly, look?ing around, look?ing es?pe?cial?ly at the sky, as if

ex?pect?ing a storm born out of this bright au?tumn sun?shine. I hey end?ed up look?ing

at the glass palace again . . . and then at each oth?er, in that know?ing, round?eyed

way that made Roland feel like shak?ing them both un?til their teeth rat?tled. Yet he

wait?ed. Some?times that was all a man could do.

"Af?ter you killed Jonas, you looked in?to the ball," Ed?die said, turn?ing to him.

"Yes."

"Trav?elled in the ball."

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about that again now; it has noth?ing to do with

these—"

"I think it does," Ed?die said. "You flew in?side a pink storm. In?side a pink gale,

you could say. Gale is a word you might use for a storm, isn't it? Es?pe?cial?ly if you

were mak?ing up a rid?dle."

"Sure," Jake said. He sound?ed dreamy, al?most like a boy who talks in his sleep.

"When does Dorothy fly over the Wiz?ard's Rain?bow? When she's a Gale."

"We ain't in Kansas any?more, sug?ar," Su?san?nah said, and then voiced a strange,

hu?mor?less bark which Roland sup?posed was a species of laugh ter. "May look a

lit?tle like it, but Kansas was nev?er . . . you know, this thin?'

"I don't un?der?stand you," Roland said. But he felt cold, and his heart was beat?ing

too fast. There were thin?nies ev?ery?where now, hadn't he told them that? Worlds

melt?ing in?to one an?oth?er as the forces of the Tow?er weak?ened? As the day when

the rose would be plowed un?der drew near?er?

"You saw things as you flew," Ed?die said. "Be?fore you got to the dark land, the

one you called Thun?der?clap, you saw things. The pi?ano?play?er, Sheb. Who turned

up again lat?er in your life, didn't he?"

"Yes, in Tull."

"And the dweller with the red hair?"

"Him, too. He had a bird named Zoltan. But when we met, he and I, we said the

nor?mal. 'Life for you, life for your crop,' that sort of thing. I thought I heard the

same when he flew by me in the pink storm, but he re?al?ly said some?thing else." He

glanced at Su?san?nah. "I saw your wheel?-chair, too. The old one."

"And you saw the witch."

"Yes. I—"

In a creaky chor?tle that re?mind?ed Roland un?nerv?ing?ly of Rhea, Jake Cham?bers

cried: "I'll get you, my pret?ty! And your lit?tle dog, too!"

Roland stared at him, try?ing not to gape.

"On?ly in the movie, the witch wasn't rid?ing a broom," Jake said. "She was on her

bike, the one with the bas?ket on the back."

"Yeah, no reap?-charms, ei?ther," Ed?die said. "Would have been a nice touch,

though. I tell you, Jake, when I was a kid, I used to have night mares about the

way she laughed."

"It was the mon?keys that gave me the creeps," Su?san?nah said. "The fly?ing

mon?keys. I'd get thinkin about em, and then have to crawl in? to bed with my mom

and dad. They'd still be ar?guin 'bout whose bright idea it was to take me to that

show in the foist place when I fell asleep be tween em."

"I wasn't wor?ried about clap?ping the heels to?geth?er," Jake

said. "Not a bit." It was

Su?san?nah and Ed?die he was speak?ing to; for the time be?ing, it was as if Roland

wasn't even there. "I wasn't wear?ing them, af?ter all."

"True," Su?san?nah said, sound?ing se?vere, "but you know what my dad?dy al?ways

used to say?"

"No, but I have a feel?ing we're go?ing to find out," Ed?die said.

She gave Ed?die a brief, se?vere look, then turned her at?ten?tion back to Jake. "

'Nev?er whis?tle for the wind un?less you want it to blow,' " she said. "And it's good

ad?vice, no mat?ter what Young Mis?ter Fool?ish here may think."

"Spanked again," Ed?die said, grin?ning.

"Tanked!" Oy said, eye?ing Ed?die severe?ly.

"Ex?plain this to me," Roland said in his soft?est voice. "I would hear. I would share

your khuf. And I would share it now."

2

They told him a sto?ry al?most ev?ery Amer?ican child of the twen?ti?eth cen tu?ry

knew, about a Kansas far?mgirl named Dorothy Gale who had been car?ried away

by a cy?clone and de?posit?ed, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz. There was no 1-

70 in Oz, but there was a yel?low brick road which served much the same pur?pose,

and there were witch?es, both good and bad. There was a ka?-tet com?prised of

Dorothy, To?to, and three friends she met along the way: the Cow?ard?ly Li?on, the

Tin Wood?man, and the Scare crow. They each had

(bird and bear and hare and fish)

a fond?est wish, and it was with Dorothy's that Roland's new friends (and Roland

him?self, for that mat?ter) iden?ti?fied the most strong?ly: she want?ed to find her way

home again.

"The Munchkins told her that she had to fol?low the yel?low brick road to Oz," Jake

said, "and so she went. She met the oth?ers along the way, sort of like you met us,

Roland—"

"Al?though you don't look much like Judy Gar?land," Ed?die

put in.

“—and even?tu?al?ly they got there. To Oz, the Emer?ald Palace, and the guy who

lived in the Emer?ald Palace.” He looked to?ward the glass palace ahead of them,

green?er and green?er in the strength?en?ing light, and then back to Roland.

“Yes, I un?der?stand. And was this fel?low, Oz, a pow?er?ful dinh? A Baron? Per?haps a

King?”

Again, the three of them ex?changed a glance from which Roland was ex?clud?ed.

“That’s com?pli?cat?ed,” Jake said. “He was sort of a hum?bug —”

“A bumhug? What’s that?”

“Hum?bug, ” Jake said, laugh?ing. “A fak?er. All talk, no ac?tion. But maybe the

im?por?tant thing is that the Wiz?ard ac?tu?al?ly came from—”

“Wiz?ard?” Roland asked sharply. He grasped Jake’s shoul?der with his di?min?ished

right hand. “Why do you call him so?”

“Be?cause that was his ti?tle, sug,” Su?san?nah said. “The Wiz?ard of Oz.” She lift?ed

Roland’s hand gen?tly but firm?ly from Jake’s shoul?der. “Let him tell it, now. He

don’t need you to squeeze it out of him.”

“Did I hurt you? Jake, I cry your par?don.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Jake said. “Don’t wor?ry about it. Any?way, Dorothy and her friends

had a lot of ad?ven?tures be?fore find?ing out the Wiz?ard was a, you know, a

bumhug.” Jake gig?gled at this with his hands clapped to his fore?head and push?ing

back his hair, like a child of five. “He couldn’t give the Li?on courage, the

Scare?crow a brain, or the Tin Wood?man a heart. Worst of all, he couldn’t send

Dorothy back to Kansas. The Wiz?ard had a bal?loon, but he went with?out her. I

don’t think he meant to, but he did.”

“It seems to me, from your telling of the tale,” Roland said, speak?ing very slow?ly,

“that Dorothy’s friends had the things they want?ed all along.”

“That’s the moral of the sto?ry,” Ed?die said. “Maybe what makes it a great sto?ry.

But Dorothy was stuck in Oz, you see. Then Glin?da showed up. Glin?da the Good.

And, as a present for smoosh?ing one of the bad witch?es un?der her house and

melt?ing an?oth?er one, Glin?da told Dorothy how to use the ru?by slip?pers. The ones

Glin?da gave her.”

Ed?die raised the red Cuban-?heeled street-?bop?pers which had been left for him on

the dot?ted white line of 1-70.

“Glin?da told Dorothy to click the heels of the ru?by slip?pers to?geth?er three times.

That would take her back to Kansas, she said. And it did.” “And that’s the end of

the tale?”

“Well,” Jake said, “it was so pop?ular that the guy who wrote it went ahead and

wrote about a thou?sand more Oz sto?ries—”

“Yeah,” Ed?die said. “Ev?ery?thing but Glin?da’s Guide to Firm Thighs.”

“—and there was this crazy re?make called The Wiz, star?ring black peo?ple—”

“Re?al?ly?” Su?sana?h asked. She looked be?mused. “What a pe?cu?liar con?cept.”

“—but the on?ly one that re?al?ly mat?ters is the first one, I think,” Jake fin?ished.

Roland hun?kered and put his hands in?to the boots which had been left for him. He

lift?ed them, looked at them, put them down again. “Are we sup?posed to put them

on, do you think? Here and now?”

His three friends from New York looked at each oth?er doubt?ful?ly. At last

Su?sana?h spoke for them—fed him the khaf which he could feel but not quite

share on his own.

“Best not to right now, maybe. Too many bad-?ass spir?its here.” “Takuro spir?its,”

Ed?die mur?mured, most?ly to him?self. Then: “Look, let’s just take em along. If we’re

sup?posed to put em on, I think we’ll know when the time comes. In the mean?time,

I think we ought to be?ware of bumhugs bear?ing gifts.”

It cracked Jake up, as Ed?die had known it would; some?times a word or an im?age

got in?to your fun?ny bone like a virus and just lived there awhile. To?mor?row the

word “bumhug” might mean noth?ing to the kid; for the rest of to?day, how?ev?er, he

was go?ing to laugh ev?ery time he heard it. Ed?die in?tend?ed to use it a lot, es?pe?cial?ly

when ole Jake wasn’t ex?pect ing it.

They picked up the red shoes which had been left for them in the east-?bound lanes

(Jake took Oy’s) and moved on again to?ward the shim?mer?ing glass cas?tle.

Oz, Roland thought. He searched his mem?ory, but he didn’t think it was a name he

had ev?er heard be?fore, or a word of the High Speech that had come in dis?guise, as

char had come dis?guised as Char?lie. Yet it had a sound that be?longed in this

busi?ness; a sound more of his world than of Jake’s, Su?sana’s, and Ed?die’s, from

whence the tale had come.

3

Jake kept ex?pect?ing the Green Palace to be?gin look?ing nor?mal as they drew clos?er

to it, the way the at?trac?tions in Dis?ney World be?gan to look nor?mal as you drew

close to them—not or?di?nary, nec?es?sar?ily, but nor?mal, things which were as much

a part of the world as the com?er bus stop or mail?box or park bench, stuff you could

touch, stuff you could write fuck piper on, if you took a no?tion.

But that didn’t hap?pen, wasn’t go?ing to hap?pen, and as they neared the Green

Palace, Jake re?alized some?thing else: it was the most beau?tiful, ra?di?ant thing he

had ev?er seen in his life. Not trust?ing it—and he did not—didn’t change the fact. It

was like a draw?ing in a fairy-?tale book, one so good it had be?come re?al, some?how.

And, like the thin?ny, it hummed ... ex?cept that this sound was far fainter, and not

un?pleas?ant.

Pale green walls rose to bat?tle?ments that jut?ted and tow?ers that soared, seem?ing

al?most to touch the clouds float?ing over the Kansas plains. These tow?ers were

topped with nee?dles of a dark?er, emer?ald green; it was from these that the red

pen?nants nick?ered. Up?on each pen?nant the sym?bol of the open eye

had been traced in yel?low.

It's the mark of the Crim?son King, Jake thought. It's re?al?ly his sigil, not John

Far?son 's. He didn't know how he knew this (how could he, when Al?aba?ma's

Crim?son Tide was the on?ly Crim?son any?thing he knew?), but he did.

"So beau?ti?ful," Su?san?nah mur?mured, and when Jake glanced at her, he thought she

was al?most cry?ing. "But not nice, some?how. Not right. Maybe not down?right bad,

the way the thin?ny is, but.. ."

"But not nice," Ed?die said. "Yeah. That works. Not a red light, maybe, but a bright

yel?low one just the same." He rubbed the side of his face (a ges?ture he had picked

up from Roland with?out even re?al?iz?ing it) and looked puz?zled. "It feels al?most not

se?ri?ous—a prac?ti?cal joke."

"I doubt it's a joke," Roland said. "Do you think it's a copy of the place where

Dorothy and her ka?tet met the false wiz?ard?"

Again, the three erst?while New York?ers seemed to ex?change a sin?gle glance of

con?sul?ta?tion. When it was over, Ed?die spoke for all of them. "Yeah. Yeah,

prob?ably. It's not the same as the one in the movie, but if this thing came out of

our minds, it wouldn't be. Be?cause we see the one from L. Frank Baum's book,

too. Both from the il?lus?tra?tions in the book. . ."

"And the ones from our imag?ina?tions," Jake said.

"But that's it," Su?san?nah said. "I'd say we're def?inite?ly off to see the Wiz?ard."

"You bet," Ed?die said. "Be?cause-?be?cause-?be?cause-?be?cause-?be?cause—"

"Be?cause of the won?der?ful things he does!" Jake and Su?san?nah fin?ished in uni?son,

then laughed, de?light?ed with each oth?er, while Roland frowned at them, feel?ing

puz?zled and look?ing left out.

"But I have to tell you guys," Ed?die said, "that it's on?ly gonna take about one more won?der?ful thing to send me around to the dark side of the Psy?cho Moon. Most like?ly for good."

4

As they drew clos?er, they could see In?ter?state 70 stretch?ing away in?to the pale green depths of the cas?tle's slight?ly round?ed out?er wall; it float?ed there like an

op?ti?cal il?lu?sion. Clos?er yet, and they could hear the pen?nants snap?ping in the

breeze and see their own rip?ply re?flec?tions, like drowned folk who some?how walk

at the bot?toms of wa?tery trop?ical graves.

There was an in?ner re?doubt of dark blue glass—it was a col?or Jake as so?ci?at?ed

with the bot?tles foun?tain?pen ink came in—and a rust-?hued wall-?walk be?tween the

re?doubt and the out?er wall. That col?or made Su?san?nah think of the bot?tles Hires

root-?beer had come in when she was a lit?tle girl.

The way in was blocked by a barred gate that was both huge and ethe re?al: it

looked like wrought iron which had been turned to glass. Each cun?ning?ly made

stake was a dif?fer?ent col?or, and these col?ors seemed to come from the in?side, as if

the bars were filled with some bright gas or liq?uid.

The trav?ellers stopped be?fore it. There was no sign of the turn?pike be yond it;

in?stead of road?way, there was a court?yard of sil?ver glass—a huge flat mir?ror, in

fact. Clouds float?ed serene?ly through its depths; so did the im?age of the oc?ca?sion?al

swoop?ing bird. Sun re?flect?ed off this glass court?yard and ran across the green

cas?tle walls in rip?ples. Un the far side, the wall of the palace's in?ner ward rose in a

glim?mery green cliff, bro?ken by nar?row loop?hole win?dows of jet-?black glass.

There was al?so an arched en?try in this wall that made Jake think of St. Patrick's

Cathe?dral.

To the left of the main door?way was a sen?try-?box made of

cream-colored glass

shot through with hazy orange threads. Its door, painted with red stripes, stood

open. The phone-booth-sized room inside was empty, although there was

something on the floor which looked to Jake like a newspaper.

Above the entry, flanking its darkness, were two crouching, leer-ing gargoyles of

darkest violet glass. Their pointed tongues poked out like bruises.

The pennants atop the towers flapped like schoolyard flags.

Crows cawed over empty cornfields now a week past the Reap.

Dis-tant, the thinny whined and warbled.

“Look at the bars of this gate,” Susanah said. She sounded breathless and

awestruck. “Look very closely.”

Jake bent toward the yellow bar until his nose nearly touched it and a faint yellow

stripe ran down the middle of his face. At first he saw nothing, and then he

gasped. What he had taken for motes of some kind were creatures—living

creatures—imprisoned inside the bar, swimming in tiny schools. They looked like

fish in an aquarium, but they also (their heads, Jake told himself, I think it’s mostly

their heads) looked oddly, disquietingly human. As if, Jake thought, he were

looking into a vertical golden sea, all the ocean in a glass rod—and living myths

no bigger than grains of dust swimming within it. A tiny woman with a fish’s tail

and long blonde hair streaming out behind her swam to her side of the glass,

seemed to peer out at the giant boy (her eyes were round, startled, and beautiful),

and then flipped away again.

Jake felt suddenly dizzy and weak. He closed his eyes until the feeling of vertigo

went away, then opened them again and looked around at the others. “Cripes! Are

they all the same?”

“All different, I think,” said Eddie, who had already peered

in?to two or three. He

bent close to the pur?ple rod, and his cheeks lit up as if in the glow of an old-

fash?ioned flu?oro?scope. "These guys here look like birds— lit?tle tiny birds."

Jake looked and saw that Ed?die was right: in?side the gate's pur?ple up right were

flocks of birds no big?ger than sum?mer minges. They swooped gid?di?ly about in

their eter?nal twi?light, weav?ing over and un?der one an oth?er, their wings leav?ing

tiny sil?ver trails of bub?bles.

"Are they re?al?ly there?" Jake asked breath?less?ly. "Are they, Roland, or are we on?ly

imag?in?ing them?"

"I don't know. But I know what this gate has been made to look like."

"So do I," Ed?die said. He sur?veyed the shin?ing posts, each with its own col?umn of

im?pris?oned light and life. Each of the gate's wings con sist?ed of six col?ored bars.

The one in the cen?ter—broad and flat in?stead of round, and made to split in two

when the gate was opened—was the thirteenth. This one was dead black, and in

this one noth?ing moved.

Oh, maybe not that you can see, but there are things mov?ing around in there, all

right, Jake thought. There's life in there, ter?ri?ble life. And maybe there are ros?es,

too. Drowned ones.

"It's a Wiz?ard's Gate," Ed?die said. "Each bar has been made to look like one of the

balls in Maer?lyn's Rain?bow. Look, here's the pink one."

Jake leaned to?ward it, hands propped on his thighs. He knew what would be in?side

even be?fore he saw them: hors?es, of cours?es. Tiny herds of them, gal?lop?ing

through that strange pink stuff that was nei?ther light nor liq?uid. Hors?es run?ning in

search of a Drop they would nev?er find, may?hap.

Ed?die stretched his hands out to grasp the sides of the cen?tral post, the black one.

"Don't!" Su?san?nah called sharply.

Ed?die ig?nored her, but Jake saw his chest stop for a mo?ment

and his lips tight?en as

he wrapped his hands around the black bar and wait?ed for some?thing—some force

per?haps sent Spe?cial De?liv?ery all the way from the Dark Tow?er it?self—to change

him, or even to strike him dead. When noth?ing hap?ened, he breathed deep again,

and risked a smile. “No elec tric?ity, but . . .” He pulled; the gate held fast. “No

give, ei?ther. I see where it splits down the mid?dle, but I get noth?ing. Want to take a

shot, Roland?”

Roland reached for the gate, but Jake put a hand on his arm and stopped him

be?fore the gun?slinger could do more than give it a pre?li?mi nary shake. “Don’t

both?er. That’s not the way.”

“Then what is?”

In?stead of an?swer?ing, Jake sat down in front of the gate, near the place where this

strange ver?sion of 1-70 end?ed, and be?gan putting on the shoes which had been left

for him. Ed?die watched a mo?ment, then sat down be?side him. “I guess we ought to

try it,” he said to Jake, “even though it’ll prob?ably turn out to be just an?oth?er

bumhug.”

Jake laughed, shook his head, and be?gan to tight?en the laces of the blood-?red

Ox?fords. He and Ed?die both knew it was no bumhug. Not this time.

5

“Okay,” Jake said when they had all put on their red shoes (he thought they looked

ex?traor?di?nar?ily stupid, es?pe?cial?ly Ed?die’s pair). “I’ll count to three, and we’ll click

our heels to?geth?er. Like this.” He clicked the Ox fords to?geth?er once, sharply . . .

and the gate shiv?ered like a loose?ly fas tened shut?ter blown by a strong wind.

Su?san?nah cried out. There fol?lowed a low, sweet chim?ing sound from the Green

Palace, as if the walls them selves had vi?brat?ed.

“I guess this’ll do the trick, all right,” Ed?die said. “I warn you, though, I’m not

singing 'Some?where Over the Rain?bow.' That's not in my con?tract."

"The rain?bow is here," the gun?slinger said soft?ly, stretch?ing his di min?ished hand out to the gate.

It wiped the smile off Ed?die's face. "Yeah, I know. I'm a lit?tle scared, Roland."

"So am I," the gun?slinger said, and in?deed, Jake thought he looked pale and ill.

"Go on, sug?ar," Su?sana?nah said. "Count be?fore we all lose our nerve." "One ... two

... three."

They clicked their heels to?geth?er solemn?ly and in uni?son: tock, tock, tock. The gate

shiv?ered more vi?olent?ly this time, the col?ors in the up?rights bright?en?ing

per?cep?ti?bly. The chime that fol?lowed was high?er, sweet?er — the sound of fine

crys?tal tapped with the haft of a knife. It echoed in dreamy har?mon?ics that made

Jake shiv?er, half with plea?sure and half with pain.

But the gate didn't open.

"What—" Ed?die be?gan.

"I know," Jake said. "We for?got Oy."

"Oh Christ," Ed?die said. "I left the world I knew to watch a kid try to put booties

on a fucked?-up weasel. Shoot me, Roland, be?fore I breed."

Roland ig?nored him, watch?ing Jake close?ly as the boy sat down on the turn?pike

and called, "Oy! To me!"

The bum?bler came will?ing?ly enough, and al?though he had sure?ly been a wild

crea?ture be?fore they had met him on the Path of the Beam, he al?lowed Jake to slip

the red leather booties on?to his paws with?out mak?ing trou?ble: in fact, once he got

the idea, he stepped in?to the last two. When all four of the lit?tle red shoes were in

place (they looked, in fact, the most like Dorothy's ru?by slip?pers), Oy sniffed at

one of them, then looked at ten?tive?ly back at Jake.

Jake clicked his heels to?geth?er three times, look?ing at the bum?bler as he did so,

ig?nor?ing the rat?tle of the gate and the soft chime from the walls of the Green

Palace.

"You, Oy!"

"Oy!"

He rolled over on his back like a dog play?ing dead, then simply looked at his own

feet with a kind of dis?gust?ed be?wil?der?ment. Look?ing at him, Jake had a sharp

mem?ory: try?ing to pat his stom?ach and rub his head at the same time, and his

fa?ther mak?ing fun of him when he couldn't do it right away.

"Roland, help me. He knows what he's sup?posed to do, but he doesn't know how to

do it." Jake glanced up at Ed?die. "And don't make any smart re?marks, okay?"

"No," Ed?die said. "No smart re?marks, Jake. Do you think just Oy has to do it this

time, or is it still a group ef?fort?"

"Just him, I think."

"But it wouldn't hurt us to kind of click along with Mitch," Susanah said.

"Mitch who?" Ed?die asked, look?ing blank.

"Nev?er mind. Go on, Jake, Roland. Give us a count again."

Ed?die grasped Oy's forepaws. Roland gen?tly grasped the bumper's rear paws. Oy

looked ner?vous at this—as if he per?haps ex?pect?ed to be swung briskly in?to the air

and giv?en the old heave-?ho—but he didn't strug?gle.

"One, two, three."

Jake and Roland gen?tly pat?ted Oy's forepaws and rear paws to?geth?er in uni?son. At

the same time they clicked the heels of their own footwear. Ed?die and Susanah

did the same.

This time the har?monic was a deep, sweet bong, like a glass church bell. The black

glass bar run?ning down the cen?ter of the gate did not split open but shat?tered,

spray?ing crumbs of ob?sid?ian glass in all di?rec?tions.

Some rat?tled against Oy's hide. He sprang up in a hur?ry, yank?ing out of Jake's and

Roland's grip and trot?ting a lit?tle dis?tance away. He sat on the bro?ken white line

be?tween the trav?el lane and the pass?ing lane of the high way, his ears laid back,

look?ing at the gate and pant?ing.

“Come on,” Roland said. He went to the left wing of the gate and pushed it slowly

open. He stood at the edge of the mirror courtyard, a tall, lanky man in cowpoke

jeans, an ancient shirt of no particular color, and improbable red cowboy boots.

“Let’s go in and see what the Wizard of Oz has to say for himself.”

“If he’s still here,” Edie said.

“Oh, I think he’s here,” Roland murmured. “Yes, I think he’s here.”

He ambled toward the main door with the empty sentry-box beside it. The others

followed, welded to their own downward reflections by the red shoes like sets of

Siamese twins.

Oy came last, skipping nimbly along in his rubber slippers, pausing once to sniff

down at his own reflected snout.

“Oy!” he cried to the humbler floating below him, and then hurried after Jake.

CHAPTER III

the wizard

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

1

Roland stopped at the sen?try-?box, glanced in, then picked up the thing which was

ly?ing on the floor. The oth?ers caught up with him and clus?tered around. It had

looked like a news?pa?per, and that was just what it was . . . al?though an

ex?ceed?ing?ly odd one. No Tope?ka Cap?ital-?Jour?nal this, and no news of a

pop?ula?tion-?lev?el?ling plague.

The Oy Dai?ly Buzz

Vol. MDLXV?DI No. 96 “Dai?ly Buzz, Dai?ly Buzz, Hand?some Iz as Hand?some

Du?uzz” Weath?er: Here to?day, gone to?mor?row Lucky Num?bers: None Prog?no?sis:

Bad

Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah

blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah

blah blah blah blah yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak

yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak blah blah blah good is bad bad is good all the

stuffs the same good is bad bad is good all the stuffs the same go slow past the

draw?ers all the stuffs the same blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah Blame is a

pain all the stuffs the same yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak chary?ou tree

all the stuffs the same blah yak blah blah yak yak blah blah blah yak yak yak

baked turkey cooked goose all the stuffs the same blah blah yak yak ride a train

die in pain all the stuffs the same blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah

blah blah blah blame blame blame blame blame blame blah blah blah blah

blah blah yak yak blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. (Re?lat?ed

sto?ry p. 6)

Below this was a picture of Roland, Edie, Susanah,
and Jake crossing the
mirrored courtyard, as if this had happened the day before
instead of only minutes
ago. Beneath it was a caption reading: Tragedy in Oz:
Travelers Arrive Seeking
Fame and Fortune; Find Death Instead.
"I like that," Edie said, adjusting Roland's revolver in
the holster he wore low on
his hip. "Comfort and encouragement after days of
confusion. Like a hot drink on
a cold fucking night."
"Don't be afraid of this," Roland said. "This is a joke."
"I'm not afraid," Edie said, "but it's a little more than a
joke. I lived with Henry
Dean for a lot of years, and I know when there's a plot to
psych me out about. I
know it very well." He looked curiously at Roland. "I
hope you don't mind me
saying this, but you're the one who looks scared, Roland."
"I'm terrified," Roland said simply.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

2

The arched en?try?way made Su?san?nah think of a song which had been pop?ular ten

years or so be?fore she had been yanked out of her world and in?to Roland's. Saw an

eye?ball peepin through a smoky cloud be?hind the Green Door, the lyric went.

When I said "Joe sent me, " some?one laughed out loud be?hind the Green Door.

There were ac?tu?al?ly two doors here in stead of one, and no peep?hole through

which an eye?ball could look in ei ther. Nor did Su?san?nah try that old speakeasy

deal about how Joe had sent her. She did, how?ev?er, bend for?ward to read the sign

hang?ing from one of the cir?cu?lar glass door-?pulls. bell out of or?der, please knock,

it said.

"Don't both?er," she said to Roland, who had ac?tu?al?ly dou?bled up his fist to do as

the sign said. "It's from the sto?ry, that's all."

Ed?die pulled her chair back slight?ly, stepped in front of it, and took hold of the

cir?cu?lar pulls. The doors opened eas?ily, the hinges rolling in si?lence. He took a

step for?ward in?to what looked like a shad?owy green grot?to, cupped his hands to his

mouth, and called: "Hey!"

The sound of his voice rolled away and came back changed... small, echo?ing, lost.

Dy?ing, it seemed.

"Christ," Ed?die said. "Do we have to do this?"

"If we want to get back to the Beam, I think so." Roland looked paler than ev?er,

but he led them in. Jake helped Ed?die lift Su?san?nah's chair over the sill (a milky

block of jade-?col?ored glass) and in?side. Oy's lit?tle shoes flashed dim red on the

green glass floor. They had gone on?ly ten paces when the doors slammed shut

be?hind them with a no-?ques?tion-?about-?it boom that

rolled past them and went

echoing away into the depths of the Green Palace.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

3

There was no reception room; only a vaulted, cavernous hallway that seemed to go

on forever. The walls were lit with a faint green glow. This is just like the hallway

in the movie, Jake thought, the one where the Cowardly Lion got so scared when

he stepped on his own tail.

And, adding a little extra touch of verisimilitude Jake could have done without,

Ed spoke up in a trembly (and better than passable) Bert Lahr imitation: "Wait

a minute, fellows, I was just thinkin—I really don't wanna see the Wizard this much.

I better wait for you outside!"

"Stop it," Jake said sharply.

"Oopit!" Oy agreed. He walked directly at Jake's heel, swinging his head

watchfully from side to side as he went. Jake could hear no sound except for their

own passage ... yet he sensed something: a sound that wasn't. It was, he thought,

like looking at a wind-chime that wants only the slightest puff of breeze to set it tinkling.

"Sorry," Ed said. "Really." He pointed. "Look down there."

About forty yards ahead of them, the green corridor did end, in a narrow green

doorway of amazing height—perhaps thirty feet from the floor to its pointed tip.

And from behind it, Jake could now hear a steady thrumming sound. As they drew

closer and the sound grew louder, his dread grew. He had to make a conscious

effort to take the last dozen steps to the door. He knew this sound; he knew it from

the run he'd made with Gash under Lud, and from the run he and his friends had

made on Blaine the Mono. It was the steady beat-beat-beat of slo-trans engines.

“It’s like a night-mare,” he said in a small, close-to-tears voice. “We’re right back where we started.”

“No, Jake,” the gun-slinger said, touching his hair. “Never think it. What you feel is an illusion. Stand and be true.”

The sign on this door wasn’t from the movie, and only Susanah knew it was from

Dante. abandon hope, all ye who enter here, it said.

Roland reached out with his two-fingered right hand and pulled the thirty-foot door open.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

4

What lay beyond it was, to the eyes of Jake, Susanah, and Edie, a weird

combination of The Wizard of Oz and Blaine the Mono. A thick mg (pale blue,

like the one in the Barony Coach) lay on the floor. The chamber was like the nave

of a cathedral, soaring to impenetrable heights of greenish-black. The pillars

which supported the glowing walls were great glass ribs of alternating green and

pink light; the pink was the exact shade of Blaine's hull. Jake saw these supporting

pillars had been carved with a billion different images, none of them comforting;

they jostled the eye and unsettled the heart. There seemed to be a preponderance

of screaming faces.

Ahead of them, dwarfing the visitors, turning them into creatures that seemed no

bigger than ants, was the chamber's only furnishing: an enormous green glass

throne. Jake tried to estimate its size and was unable—he had no reference-points

to help him. He thought that the throne's back might be fifty feet high, but it could

as easily have been seventy-five or a hundred. It was marked with the open eye

symbol, this time traced in red instead of yellow. The rhythmic thrusting of the

light made the eye seem alive; to be beating like a heart.

Above the throne, rising like the pipes of a mighty medieval organ, were thirteen

great cylinders, each pulsing a different color. Each, that was, save for the pipe

which ran directly down in back of the throne's center. That one was black as

midnight and as still as death.

"Hey!" Susanah shouted from her chair. "Anyone here?"

At the sound of her voice, the pipes flashed so brilliantly

that Jake had to shield

his eyes. For a moment the entire throne room glared like an exploding rain-bow.

Then the pipes went out, went dark, went dead, just as the wizard's glass in

Roland's story had done when the glass (or the force inhabiting the glass) decided

to shut up for awhile. Now there was only the column of blackness, and the steady

green pulse of the empty throne.

Next, a somehow tired humming sound, as of a very old servomechanism being

called in to use one final time, began to whine its way in to their ears. Panels, each

at least six feet long and two feet wide, slid open in the arms of the throne. From

the black slots thus revealed, a rose-colored smoke began to drift out and up. As it

rose, it darkened to a bright red. And in it, a terribly familiar zigzag line appeared.

Jake knew what it was even before the words

{Lud Can-dleton Rilea The Falls of the Hounds Dash-erville Topeka}

appeared, glowing smoke-bright.

It was Blaine's route-map.

Roland could say all he wanted about how things had changed, how Jake's feeling

of being trapped in a nightmare

{this is the worst nightmare of my life, and that is the truth}

was just an illusion created by his confused mind and frightened heart, but Jake

knew better. This place might look a little bit like the throne room of Oz the Great

and Terrible, but it was really Blaine the Mono. They were back aboard Blaine,

and soon the riding would begin all over again.

Jake felt like screaming.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

5

Ed?die rec?og?nized the voice that boomed out of the smoky route-?map hang?ing

above the green throne, but he be?lieved it was Blaine the Mono no more than he

be?lieved it was the Wiz?ard of Oz. Some wiz?ard, per?haps, but this wasn't the

Emer?ald City, and Blaine was just as dead as dogshit. Ed?die had sent him home

with a fuckin rup?ture.

"HEL?LO THERE AGAIN, LIT?TLE TRAIL?HANDS!"

The smoky route-?map pulsed, but Ed?die no longer as?so?ci?ated it with the voice,

al?though he guessed they were sup?posed to. No, the voice was com?ing from the

pipes.

He glanced down, saw Jake's pa?per-?white face, and knelt be?side him. "If scrap,

kid," he said.

"N-?No ... it's Blaine ... not dead..."

"He's dead, all right. This is noth?ing but an am?pli?fied ver?sion of the af?ter-?school

an?nounce?ments . . . who's got de?ten?tion and who's sup?posed to re?port to Room Six

for Speech Ther?apy. You dig?"

"What?" Jake looked up at him, lips wet and trem?bling, eyes dazed. "What do

you—"

"Those pipes are speak?ers. Even a pip?squeak can sound big through a twelve-

speak?er Dol?by sound-?sys?tem; don't you re?mem?ber the movie? It has to sound big

be?cause it's a bumhug, Jake—just a bumhug."

"WHAT ARE YOU TELLING HIM, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK? ONE OF YOUR

STUPID, NASTY-?MIND?ED LIT?TLE JOKES? ONE OF YOUR UN?FAIR

RID?DLES?"

"Yeah," Ed?die said. "The one that goes, 'How many dipo?lar com?put ers does it

take to screw in a light?bulb?' Who are you, bud?dy? 1

know god?dam well you're

not Blaine the Mono, so who are you?"

"I ... AM . . . Oz!" the voice thundered. The glass columns flashed; so did the

pipes behind the throne. "OZ THE GREAT! OZ THE POW?ER?FUL! WHO ARE

YOU?"

Su?san?nah rolled forward until her wheelchair was at the base of the dull green

steps leading up to a throne that would have dwarfed even Lord Perth.

"I'm Su?san?nah Dean, the small and crippled," she said, "and I was raised to be

polite, but not to suffer bullshit. We're here because we're supposed to be here—why

else did we get left the shoes?"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME, SU?SAN?NAH? WHAT WOULD YOU

HAVE, LITTLE COW?GIRL?"

"You know," she said. "We want what everyone wants, so far as I know—to go

back home again, 'cause there's no place like home. We—"

"You can't go home," Jake said. He spoke in a rapid, frightened murmur. "You

can't go home again, Thomas Wolfe said that, and that is the truth."

"It's a lie, sug," Su?san?nah said. "A flat-out lie. You can go home again. All you

have to do is find the right rainbow and walk under it. We've found it; the rest is

just, you know, footwork."

"WOULD YOU GO BACK TO NEW YORK, SU?SAN?NAH DEAN? ED?DIE

DEAN? JAKE CHAMBERS? IS THAT WHAT YOU ASK OF OZ, THE

MIGHTY AND POW?ER?FUL?"

"New York isn't home for us anymore," Su?san?nah said. She looked very small yet

very fearless as she sat in her new wheelchair at the foot of the enormous, pulsing

throne. "No more than Gilead is home for Roland. Take us back to the Path of the

Beam. That's where we want to go, because that's our way home. Only way home

we got."

"GO AWAY!" cried the voice from the pipes. "GO AWAY AND COME BACK

TO?MOR?ROW! WE'LL DIS?CUSS THE BEAM THEN! FID?DLE-?DE-?DEE, SAID

SCAR?LETT, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THE BEAM TO?MOR?ROW, FOR

TO?MOR?ROW IS AN?OTH?ER DAY!"

"No," Ed?die said. "We'll talk about it now."

"DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POWER?FUL OZ!"

the voice cried, and the pipes flashed fu?ri?ous?ly with each word. Su?san?nah was sure

this was sup?posed to be scary, but she found it al?most amus?ing, in?stead. It was like

watch?ing a sales?man demon?strate a child's toy. Hey, kids! When you talk, the pipes

flash bright col?ors! Try it and see!

"Sug?ar, you best lis?ten, now," Su?san?nah said. "What you don't want to do is arouse

the wrath of folks with guns. Es?pe?cial?ly when you be livin in a glass house."

"I SAID COME BACK TO?MOR?ROW!"

Red smoke once more be?gan to boil out of the slots in the arms of the throne. It

was thick?er now. The shape which had been Blaine's route-?map melt?ed apart and

joined it. The smoke formed a face, this time. It was nar row and hard and

watch?ful, framed by long hair.

It's the man Roland shot in the desert, Su?san?nah thought won?der?ing?ly. It's that

man Jonas. I know it is.

Now Oz spoke in a slight?ly trem?bling voice: "DO YOU PRE?SUME TO

THREAT?EN THE GREAT OZ?" The lips of the huge, smoky face hov?er?ing over

the throne's seat part?ed in a snarl of min?gled men?ace and con?tempt. "YOU

UN?GRATE?FUL CREA?TURES! OH, YOU UN?GRATE FUL CREA?TURES!"

Ed?die, who knew smoke and mir?rors when he saw them, had glanced in an?oth?er

di?rec?tion. His eyes widened and he gripped Su?san?nah's arm above the el?bow.

"Look," he whis?pered. "Christ, Suze, look at Oy!"

The bil?ly-?bum?bler had no in?ter?est in smoke-?ghosts, whether they were mono?rail

route-?maps, dead Cof?fin Hunters, or just Hol?ly?wood special ef?fects of the pre-

World War II va?ri?ety. He had seen (or smelled) something that was more

in?ter?est?ing.

Su?san?nah grabbed Jake, turned him, and point?ed at the bum?bler. She saw the boy's

eyes widen with un?der?stand?ing a mo?ment be?fore Oy reached the small al?cove in

the left wall. It was screened from the main cham?ber by a green cur?tain which

matched the glass walls. Oy stretched his long neck forward, caught the cur?tain's

fab?ric in his teeth, and yanked it back.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

6

Behind the curtain red and green lights flashed; cylinders spun inside glass boxes;

needles moved back and forth inside long rows of lighted dishes. Yet Jake barely

noticed these things. It was the man who took all his attention, the one sitting at

the console, his back to them. His filthy hair, streaked with dirt and blood, hung to

his shoulders in matted clumps. He was wearing some sort of headset, and was

speaking into a tiny mike which hung in front of his mouth. His back was to them,

and at first he had no idea that Oy had smelled him out and uncovered his hiding

place.

“GO!” thundered the voice from the pipes . . . except now Jake saw where it was

really coming from. “COME BACK TOMORROW IF YOU LIKE, BUT GO

NOW! I WARN YOU!”

“It is Jonas, Roland must not have killed him after all,” Ed died whispered, but Jake

knew better. He had recognized the voice. Even distorted by the amplification of

the colored pipes, he had recognized the voice. How could he have ever believed it

to be the voice of Blaine?

“I WARN YOU, IF YOU REFUSE—”

Oy barked, a sharp and somehow forbidding sound. The man in the equipment

alcove began to turn.

Tell me, curiously, Jake remembered this voice saying before its owner had discovered

the dubious attractions of amplification. Tell me all you know about dipolar

computers and sensitive circuits. Tell me and I’ll give you a drink.

It wasn’t Jonas, and it wasn’t the Wizard of anything. It was David Quick’s

grandson. It was the Tick-Tock Man.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

7

Jake stared at him, horrified. The coiled, dangerous creature who had lived

beneath Lud with his mates—Gasher and Hoots and Brandon and Tilly—was

gone. This might have been that monster's ruined father... or grandfather. His left

eye—the one Oy had punctured with his claws—bulged white and misshapen,

partly in its socket and partly on his unshaven cheek. The right side of his head

looked half-scalped, the skull showing through in a long, triangular strip. Jake had

a distant, panicked darkened memory of a flap of skin falling over the side of Tick-

Tock's face, but he had been on the edge of hysteria by that point... and was again

now.

Oy had also recognized the man who had tried to kill him and was barking

hysterically, head down, teeth bared, back bowed. Tick-Tock stared at him with

wide, stunned eyes.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," said a voice from behind them,

and then muttered. "My friend Andrew is having another in a long series of bad

days. Poor boy. I suppose I was wrong to bring him out of Lud, but he just looked

so lost..." The owner of the voice muttered again.

Jake swung around and saw that there was now a man sitting in the middle of the

great throne, with his legs casually crossed in front of him. He was wearing jeans,

a dark jacket that belted at the waist, and old, run-down cowboy boots. On his

jacket was a button that showed a pig's head with a bullet hole between the eyes. In

his lap this newcomer held a drawstring bag. He rose, standing in the seat of the

throne like a child in daddy's chair, and the smile dropped

away from his face like

loose skin. Now his eyes blazed, and his lips parted over vast, hungry teeth.

“Get them, Andrew! Get them! Kill them! Every sister-fucking one of them!”

“My life for you!” the man in the alcove screamed, and for the first time Jake saw

the machine-gun propped in the corner. Tick-Tock sprang for it and snatched it up.

“My life for you!”

He turned, and Oy was on him once again, leaping forward and up ward, sinking

his teeth deep into Tick-Tock’s left thigh, just below the crotch.

Eddie and Susanah drew in unison, each raising one of Roland’s big guns. They

fired in concert, not even the smallest overlap in the sound of their shots. One of

them tore off the top of Tick-Tock’s miserable head, buried itself in the equipment,

and created a loud but mercifully brief snarl of feedback. The other took him in the throat.

He staggered forward one step, then two. Oy dropped to the floor and backed

away from him, snarling. A third step took Tick-Tock out into the throne-room

proper. He raised his arms toward Jake, and the boy could read Ticky’s hatred in

his remaining green eye; the boy thought he could hear the man’s last, hateful

thought: Oh, you fucking little squint—

Then Tick-Tock collapsed forward, as he had collapsed in the Cradle of the Grays

... on this time he would rise no more.

“Thus fell Lord Perth, and the earth did shake with that thunder,” said the man on

the throne.

Except he’s not a man, Jake thought. Not a man at all. We’ve found the Wizard at

last, I think. And I’m pretty sure I know what’s in the bag he has.

“Marten,” Roland said. He held out his left hand, the one which was still whole.

“Marten Broadcloak. After all these years. After all these

cen?turies.”

”Want this, Roland?”

Ed?die put the gun he had used to kill the Tick-?Tock Man in Roland’s hand. A

ten?dril of blue smoke was still ris?ing from the bar?rel. Roland looked at the old

re?volver as if he had nev?er seen it be?fore, then slow?ly lift?ed it and point?ed it at the

grin?ning, rosy-?cheeked fig?ure sit?ting cross-?legged on the Green Palace’s throne.

”Fi?nal?ly,” Roland breathed, thumb?ing back the trig?ger. ”Fi?nal?ly in my sights.”

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

8

"That six-?shoot?er will do you no good, as I think you know," the man on the

throne said. "Not against me. On?ly mis?fires against me, Roland, old fel?low. How's

the fam?ily, by the way? I seem to have lost touch with them over the years. I was

al?ways such a lousy cor?re?spon?dent. Some?one ought to take a hoss?whip to me, aye,

so they should!"

He threw back his head and laughed. Roland pulled the trig?ger of the gun in his

hand. When the ham?mer fell there was on?ly a dull click.

"Toad?jer," the man on the throne said. "I think you must have got?ten some of those

wet slugs in there by ac?ci?dent, don't you? The ones with the flat pow?der? Good for

block?ing the sound of the thin?ny, but not so good for shoot?ing old wiz?ards, are

they? Too bad. And your hand, Roland, look at your hand! Short a cou?ple of

fin?gers, by the look. My, this has been hard on you, hasn't it? Things could get

eas?ier, though. You and your friends could have a fine, fruit?ful life—and, as Jake

would say, that is the truth. No more lob?strosi?ties, no more mad trains, no more

dis?qui?et ing—not to men?tion dan?ger?ous—trips to oth?er worlds. All you have to do

is give over this stupid and hope?less quest for the Tow?er."

"No," Ed?die said.

"No," Su?san?nah said.

"No," Jake said.

"No!" Oy said, and added a bark.

The dark man on the green throne con?tin?ued to smile, un?per?turbed. "Roland?" he

asked. "What about you?" Slow?ly, he raised the draw?string bag. It looked dusty

and old. It hung from the wiz?ard's fist like a teardrop, and now the thing in its

pouch be?gan to pulse with pink light. "Cry off, and they

need nev?er see what's

in?side this—they need nev?er see the last scene of that sad long-?ago play. Cry off.

Turn from the Tow?er and go your way.”

“No,” Roland said. He be?gan to smile, and as his smile broad?ened, that of the man

sit?ting on the throne be?gan to fal?ter. “You can en?chant my guns, those of this world, I reck?on,” he said.

“Roland, I don't know what you're think?ing of, lad?die, but I warn you not to—”

“Not to cross Oz the Great? Oz the Pow?er?ful? But I think I will, Marten ... or

Maer?lyn ... or who?ev?er you call your?self now...”

“Flagg, ac?tu?al?ly,” the man on the throne said. “And we've met be fore.” He smiled.

In?stead of broad?en?ing his face, as smiles usu?al?ly did, it con?tract?ed Flagg's fea?tures

in?to a nar?row and spite?ful gri?mace. “In the wreck of Gilead. You and your

sur?viv?ing pals—that laugh?ing don?key Cuth?bert All?go?od made one of your par?ty, I

re?mem?ber, and De?Cur?ry, the fel?low with the birth?mark, made an?oth?er—were on

your way west, to seek the Tow?er. Or, in the par?lance of Jake's world, you were

off to see the Wiz?ard. I know you saw me, but I doubt you knew un?til now that I saw you, as well.”

“And will again, I reck?on,” Roland said. “Un?less, that is, I kill you now and put an end to your in?ter?fer?ence.”

Still hold?ing his own gun out in his left hand, he went for the one tucked in the

waist?band of his jeans—Jake's Ruger, a gun from an?oth?er world and per?haps

im?mune to this crea?ture's en?chant?ments—with his right. And he was fast as he had

al?ways been fast, his speed blind?ing.

The man on the throne shrieked and cringed back. The bag fell from his lap, and

the glass ball—once held by Rhea, once held by Jonas, once held by Roland

him?self—slipped out of its mouth. Smoke, green this time in?stead of red, bil?lowed

from the slots in the arms of the throne. It rose in ob?scuring fumes. Yet Roland

still might have shot the figure disappearing into the smoke if he had made a clean

draw. He didn't, however; the Ruger slid in the grip of his reduced hand, then

twisted. The front sight caught on his belt-buckle. It took only an extra quarter-

second for him to free the snag, but that was the quarter-second he had needed. He

pumped three shots into the billowing smoke, then ran forward, oblivious of the

shouts of the others.

He waved the smoke aside with his hands. His shots had shattered the back of the

throne into thick green slabs of glass, but the man-shaped creature which had

called itself Flagg was gone. Roland found himself already beginning to wonder

if he—or it had been there in the first place.

The ball was still there, however, unharmed and glowing the same enticing pink

he remembered from so long ago—from Mejis, when he had been young and in

love. This survivor of Maerlyn's Rainbow had rolled almost to the edge of the

throne's seat; two more inches and it would have plunged over and shattered on

the floor. Yet it had not; still it remained, this bewitched thing Susan Delgado had

first glimpsed through the window of Rhea's hut, under the light of the Kiss

Moon.

Roland picked it up—how well it fit his hand, how natural it felt against his palm,

even after all these years—and looked into its cloudy, troubled depths. "You

always did have a charmed life," he whispered to it. He thought of Rhea as he had

seen her in this ball—her ancient, laughing eyes. He thought of the flames from

the Reap-Night bonfire rising around Susan, making her beauty shimmer in the

heat. Making it shiver like a mirage.

Wretched glam! he thought. If I dashed you to the floor,

sure?ly we would drown in

the sea of tears that would pour out of your split be?ly . . .
the tears of all those

you've put to ru?in.

And why not do it? Left whole, the nasty thing might be
able to help them back to

the Path of the Beam, but Roland didn't be?lieve they ac?tu
al?ly need?ed it. He

thought that Tick-?Tock and the crea?ture which had called
it?self Flagg had been

their last chal?lenge in that re?gard. The Green Palace was
their door back to Mid-

World ... and it was theirs, now. They had con?quered it by
force of arms.

But you can't go yet, gun?slinger. Not un?til you've fin?
ished your sto?ry, told the last

scene.

Whose voice was that? Van?nay's? No. Cort's? No. Nor was
it the voice of his

fa?ther, who had once turned him naked out of a whore's
bed. That was the hard?est

voice, the one he of?ten heard in his trou?bled dreams, the
one he want?ed so to

please and so sel?dom could. No, not that voice, not this
time.

This time what he heard was the voice of ka—ka like a
wind. He had told so much

of that aw?ful four?teenth year ... but he hadn't fin?ished
the tale. As with Det?ta

Walk?er and the Blue La?dy's for?spe?cial plate, there was
one more thing. A hid?den

thing. The ques?tion wasn't, he saw, whether or not the five
of them could find their

way out of the Green Palace and re cov?er the Path of the
Beam; the ques?tion was

whether or not they could go on as ka-?tet. If they were to
do that, there could be

noth?ing hid?den; he would have to tell them of the fi?nal
time he had looked in?to the

wiz?ard's glass in that long-?ago year. Three nights past the
wel?com?ing ban?quet, it

had been. He would have to tell them—

No, Roland, the voice whis?pered. Not just tell. Not this
time. You know bet?ter.

Yes. He knew bet?ter.

"Come," he said, turning to them.

They drew slowly around him, their eyes wide and filling with the ball's flashing

pink light. Already they were half-hypnotized by it, even Oy.

"We are ka-tet," Roland said, holding the ball toward them. "We are one from

many. I lost my one true love at the beginning of my quest for the Dark Tower.

Now look into this wretched thing, if you would, and see what I lost not long after.

See it once and for all; see it very well."

They looked. The ball, cupped in Roland's upraised hands, began to pulse faster. It

gathered them in and swept them away. Caught and whirled in the grip of that

pink storm, they flew over the Wizard's Rain bow to the Gilead that had been.

CHAPTER. IV

the glass

Jake of New York stands in an upper corridor of the Great Hall of Gilead—more

casualties, here in the green land, than Mayor's House. He looks around and sees

Susan and Ed die standing by a tapestry, their eyes big, their hands tightly

entwined. And Susan is standing; she has her legs back, at least for now, and

what she called "cappies" have been replaced by a pair of rubber slippers exactly

like those Dorothy wore when she stepped out upon her version of the Great Road

to find the Wizard of Oz, that bumhug.

She has her legs because this is a dream, Jake thinks, but knows it is no dream. He

looks down and sees Oy looking up at him with his anxious, intelligent, gold-

ringed eyes. He is still wearing the red booties. Jake bends and strokes Oy's head.

The feel of the humbler's fur under his hand is clear and real. No, this isn't a dream.

Yet Roland is not here, he realizes; they are four instead of five. He realizes

something else as well: the air of this corridor is faintly

pink, and small pink halos

revolve around the funny, old-fashioned lightbulbs
that illuminate the corridor.

Something is going to happen; some story is going to
play out in front of their

eyes. And now, as if the very thought had summoned
them, the boy hears the click

of approaching footsteps.

It's a story I know, Jake thinks. One I've been told before.

As Roland comes around the corner, he realizes what
story it is: the one where

Marten Broadcloak stops Roland as Roland passes by on
his way to the rooftop,

where it will perhaps be cooler. "You, boy," Marten will
say. "Come in! Don't

stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you." But
of course that isn't the

truth, was never the truth, will never be the truth, no
matter how much time slips

and bends. What Marten wants is for the boy to see his
mother, and to understand

that Gabrielle Deschain has become the mistress of his
father's wizard. Marten

wants to goad the boy into an early test of manhood
while his father is away and

can't put a stop to it; he wants to get the puppy out of his
way before it can grow

teeth long enough to bite.

Now they will see all this; the sad comedy will go its sad
and preordained course

in front of their eyes. I'm too young, Jake thinks, but of
course he is not too young;

Roland will be only three years older when he comes to
Mejis with his friends and

meets Susan upon the Great Road. Only three years older
when he loves her; only

three years older when he loses her.

I don't care, I don't want to see it—

And won't, he realizes as Roland draws closer; all that
has already happened. For

this is not August, the time of Full Earth, but late fall or
early winter. He can tell

by the serape Roland wears, a souvenir of his trip to the
Outer Arc, and by the

vapor that smokes from his mouth and nose each time he

ex?hales: no cen?tral

heat?ing in Gilead, and it's cold up here.

There are oth?er changes as well: Roland is now wear?ing the guns which are his

birthright, the big ones with the san?dal?wood grips. His father passed them on at

the ban?quet, Jake thinks. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. And

Roland's face, al?though still that of a boy, is not the open, un?tried face of the one

who idled up this same cor?ri?dor five months be?fore; the boy who was en?snared by

Marten has been through much since then, and his bat?tle with Cort has been the

very least of it.

Jake sees some?thing else, too: the boy gun?slinger is wear?ing the red cow?boy boots.

He doesn't know it, though. Be?cause this isn't re?al?ly hap?pen?ing.

Yet some?how it is. They are in?side the wiz?ard's glass, they are in?side the pink

storm (those pink ha?los re?volv?ing around the light fixtures re mind Jake of The

Falls of the Hounds, and the moon?bows re?volv?ing in the mist), and this is

hap?pen?ing all over again.

"Roland!" Ed?die calls from where he and Su?san?nah stand by the tapestry.

Su?san?nah gasps and squeezes his shoul?der, want?ing him to be silent, but Ed?die

ig?nores her. "No, Roland! Don't! Bad idea! " "No! Olan!" Oy yaps.

Roland ig?nores both of them, and he pass?es by Jake a hand's breadth away

with?out see?ing him. For Roland, they are not here; red boots or no red boots, this

ka?tet is far in his fu?ture.

He stops at a door near the end of the cor?ri?dor, hes?itates, then rais?es his fist and

knocks. Ed?die starts down the cor?ri?dor to?ward him, still hold ing Su?san?nah's

hand... now he looks al?most as if he is drag?ging her.

"Come on, Jake, " says Ed?die.

"No, I don't want to."

"It's not about what you want, and you know it. We're sup?

posed to see. If we can't

stop him, we can at least do what we came here to do. Now come on!"

Heart heavy with dread, his stomach clenched in a knot, Jake comes along. As

they approach Roland—the guns look enormous on his slim hips, and his unlined

but already tired face somehow makes Jake feel like weeping—the gun-slinger

knocks again.

"She ain't there, sugar!" Susanah shouts at him. "She ain't there or she ain't

answering the door, and which one it is don't matter to you! Leave it! Leave her!

She ain't worth it! Just bein your mother don't make her worth it! Go away!"

But he doesn't hear her, either, and he doesn't go away. As Jake, Edie, Susanah,

and Oy gather unseen behind him, Roland tries the door to his mother's room and

finds it unlocked. He opens it, revealing a shadowy chamber decorated with silk

hangings. On the floor is a rug that looks like the Persians beloved of Jake's

mother . . . only this rug, Jake knows, comes from the Province of Kashamin.

On the far side of the parlor, by a window which has been shuttered against the

winter winds, Jake sees a low-backed chair and knows it is the one she was in on

the day of Roland's manhood test; it is where she was sitting when her son

observed the love-bite on her neck.

The chair is empty now, but as the gun-slinger takes another step into the room and

turns to look toward the apartment's bedroom, Jake observes a pair of

shoes—black, not red—beneath the drapes flanking the shuttered window.

"Roland!" he shouts. "Roland, behind the drapes! Someone behind the drapes!

Look out!"

But Roland doesn't hear.

"Mother?" he calls, and even his voice is the same, Jake would know it anywhere

. . . but it is such a mag?ical?ly fresh?ened ver?sion of it!
Young and un?cracked by all

the years of dust and wind and cigarette smoke. "Moth?er,
it's Roland! I want to
talk to you!"

Still no an?swer. He walks down the short hall which leads
to the bed room. Part of

Jake wants to stay here in the par?lor, to go to that drape
and yank it aside, but he

knows this isn't the way it's sup?posed to go. Even if he
tried, he doubts it would do

any good; his hand would like?ly pass right through, like
the hand of a ghost.

"Come on, " Ed?die says. "Stay with him."

They go in a clus?ter that might have been com?ic un?der
oth?er cir?cum stances. Not

un?der these; here it is a case of three peo?ple des?per?ate
for the com?fort of friends.

Roland stands look?ing at the bed against the room's left
wall. He looks at it as if

hyp?no?tized. Per?haps he is try?ing to imag?ine Marten in
it with his moth?er; per?haps

he is re?mem?ber?ing Su?s?san, with whom he nev?er slept in
a prop?er bed, let alone a

canopied lux?ury such as this. Jake can see the gun?
slinger's dim pro?file in a three-

pan?eled mir?ror across the room, in an al?cove. This triple
glass stands in front of a

small ta?ble the boy rec?og?nizes from his moth?er's side of
his par?ents' bed?room; it is

a van?ity.

The gun?slinger shakes him?self and comes back from
what?ev?er thoughts have

seized his mind. On his feet are those ter?ri?ble boots; in
this dim light, they look

like the boots of a man who has walked through a creek of
blood.

"Moth?er!"

He takes a step to?ward the bed and ac?tu?al?ly bends a lit?
tle, as if he thinks she might

be hid?ing un?der it. If she's been hid?ing, how?ev?er, it
wasn't there; the shoes which

Jake saw be?neath the drape were wom?en's shoes, and the
shape which now stands

at the end of the short cor?ri?dor, just out side the bed?

room door, is wear?ing a

dress. Jake can see its hem.

And he sees more than that. Jake un?der?stands Roland's trou?bled rela tion?ship with

his moth?er and fa?ther bet?ter than Ed?die or Su?san?nah ev?er could, be?cause Jake's

own par?ents are pe?cu?liar?ly like them: Elmer Cham bers is a gun?slinger for the

Net?work, and Megan Cham?bers has a long his?to?ry of sleep?ing with sick friends.

This is noth?ing Jake has been told, but he knows, some? how; he has shared khef

with his moth?er and fa?ther, and he knows what he knows.

He knows some?thing about Roland, as well: that he saw his moth?er in the wiz?ard's

glass. It was Gabrielle De?schain, fresh back from her re? treat in De?baria,

Gabrielle who would con?fess to her hus?band the er?rors of her ways and her

think?ing af?ter the ban?quet, who would cry his par?don and beg to be tak?en back to

his bed. . . and, when Steven drowsed af?ter their love? mak?ing, she would bury the

knife in his breast . . . or per?haps on?ly light?ly scratch his arm with it, not even

wak?ing him. With that knife, it would come to the same ei?ther way.

Roland had seen it all in the glass be?fore fi?nal?ly turn?ing the wretched thing over to

his fa?ther, and Roland had put a stop to it. To save Steven De?schain 's life, Ed?die

and Su?san?nah would have said, had they seen so far in?to the busi?ness, but Jake

has the un?hap?py wis?dom of un?hap?py chil dren and sees fur?ther. To save his

moth?er's life as well. To give her one last chance to re? cov?er her san?ity, one last

chance to stand at her hus band's side and be true. One last chance to re?pent of

Marten Broad?cloak.

Sure?ly she will, sure?ly she must! Roland saw her face that day, how un?hap?py she

was, and sure?ly she must! Sure?ly she can?not have cho? sen the ma?gi?cian! If he can

on?ly make her see . . .

So, un?aware that he has once more lapsed in?to the un?wis?dom of the very

young—Roland can?not grasp that un?hap?pi?ness and shame are of?ten no match for

de?sire—he has come here to speak to his moth?er, to beg her to come back to her

hus?band be?fore it's too late. He has saved her from her?self once, he will tell her,

but he can?not do it again.

And if she still won't go, Jake thinks, or tries to brave it out, pre?tend she doesn't

know what he's talk?ing about, he'll give her a choice: leave Gilead with his

help—now, tonight—or be clapped in chains to?mor?row morn?ing, a traitor so

out?ra?geous she will al?most cer?tain?ly be hung as Hax the cook was hung.

“Moth?er? ” he calls, still un?aware of the shape stand?ing in the shad ows be?hind

him. He takes one fur?ther step in?to the room, and now the shape moves. The shape

rais?es its hands. There is some?thing in its hands. Not a gun, Jake can tell that

much, but it has a dead?ly look to it, a snaky look, some?how—

“Roland, watch out!” Su?san?nah shrieks, and her voice is like a ma?gi cal switch.

There is some?thing on the dress?ing ta?ble—the glass, of course;

Gabrielle has stolen it, it's what she 'II bring to her lover as a con?so?la?tion prize

for the mur?der her son pre?vent?ed—and now it lights as if in re sponse to

Su?san?nah's voice. It sprays bril?liant pink light up the triple mir ror and casts its

glow back in?to the room. In that light, in that triple glass, Roland fi?nal?ly sees the

fig?ure be?hind him.

“Christ!” Ed?die Dean shrieks, hor?ri?fied. “Oh Christ, Roland! That's not your moth?er! That's—”

It's not even a wom?an, not re?al?ly, not any?more; it is a kind of liv?ing corpse in a

road?filthy black dress. There are on?ly a few strag?gling tufts of hair left on her

head and there's a gap?ing hole where her nose used to be, but her eyes still blaze,

and the snake she holds wrig?gling be?tween her hands is very live?ly. Even in his

own hor?ror, Jake has time to won?der if she got it from un?der the same rock where

she found the one Roland killed.

It is Rhea who has been wait?ing for the gun?slinger in his moth?er's apart?ment; it is

the Coos, come not just to re?trieve her glam but to fin?ish with the boy who has

caused her so much trou?ble.

"Now, ye trol?lop's get!" she cries shril?ly, cack?ling. "Now ye'll pay!"

But Roland has seen her, in the glass he has seen her, Rhea be?trayed by the very

ball she came to take back, and now he is whirling, his hands drop?ping to his new

guns with all their dead?ly speed. He is four?teen, his re?flex?es are the sharpest and

quick?est they 'II ev?er be, and he goes off like ex?plod?ing gun?pow?der.

"No, Roland, don't!" Su?san?nah screams. "It's a trick, it's a glam!"

Jake has just time to look from the mir?ror to the wom?an ac?tu?al?ly stand?ing in the

door?way; has just time to re?al?ize he, too, has been tricked.

Per?haps Roland al?so un?der?stands the truth at the last split-?sec?ond— that the

wom?an in the door?way re?al?ly is his moth?er af?ter all, that the thing in her hands

isn't a snake but a belt, some?thing she has made for him, a peace of?fer?ing,

may?hap, that the glass has lied to him in the on?ly way it can...by re?flec?tion.

In any case, it's too late. The guns are out and thun?der?ing, their bright yel?low

flash?es light?ing the room. He pulls the trig?ger of each gun twice be?fore he can

stop, and the four slugs drive Gabrielle De?schain back in? to the cor?ri?dor with the

hope?ful can-?we-?make-?peace smile still on her face.

She dies that way, smil?ing.

Roland stands where he is, the smok?ing guns in his hands,

his face cramped in a

gri?mace of sur?prise and hor?ror, just be?gin?ning to get the truth of what he must

car?ry with him the rest of his life: he has used the guns of his fa?ther to kill his moth?er.

Now cack?ling laugh?ter fills the room. Roland does not turn; he is frozen by the

wom?an in the blue dress and black shoes who lies bleed?ing in the cor?ri?dor of her

apart?ment; the wom?an he came to save and has killed, in?stead. She lies with the

hand?-wo?ven belt draped across her bleed ing stom?ach.

Jake turns for him, and is not sur?prised to see a green?-faced wom?an in a point?ed

black hat swim?ming in?side the hall. It is the Wicked Witch of the East; it is al?so, he

knows, Rhea of the Coos. She stares at the boy with the guns in his hands and

bares her teeth at him in the most ter?ri?ble grin Jake has ev?er seen in his life.

“I’ve burned the stupid girl ye loved—aye, burned her alive, I did— and now I’ve

made ye a ma?tri?cide. Do ye re?pent of killing my snake yet, gun?slinger? My poor,

sweet Er?mot? Do ye re?gret play?ing yer hard games with one more trig than ye ‘II

ev?er be in yer mis?er?able life? ”

He gives no sign that he hears, on?ly stares at his la?dy moth?er. Soon he will go to

her, kneel by her, but not yet; not yet.

The face in the ball now turns to?ward the three pil?grims, and as it does it changes,

be?comes old and bald and rad?dled—be?comes, in fact, the face Roland saw in the

ly?ing mir?ror. The gun?slinger has been un?able to see his fu?ture friends, but Rhea

sees them; aye, she sees them very well.

“Cry it off! ” she croaks—it is the caw of a raven sit?ting on a leaf?less branch

be?neath a win?ter?-dimmed sky. “Cry it off! Re?nounce the Tow?er!”

“Nev?er, you bitch, ” Ed?die says.

“Ye see what he is! What a mon?ster he is! And this is on?ly the be?gin?ning of it, ye

ken! Ask him what hap?pened to Cuth?bert! To Alain—
Alain's touch, clever as

'twas, saved him not in the end, so it didn't! Ask him what
hap?pened to Jamie De

Cur?ry! He nev?er had a friend he didn't kill, nev?er had a
lover who's not dust in the
wind!"

"Go your way, " Su?san?nah says, "and leave us to ours. "

Rhea's green, cracked lips twist in a hor?ri?ble sneer. "He's
killed his own moth?er!

What will he do to you, ye stupid brown-?skinned bitch ? "

"He didn't kill her, " Jake said. "You killed her. Now go!"

Jake takes a step to?ward the ball, mean?ing to pick it up
and dash it to the floor . . .

and he can do that, he re?al?izes, for the ball is re?al. It's
the one thing in this vi?sion

that is. But be?fore he can put his hands to it, it flash?es a
sound?less ex?plo?sion of

pink light. Jake throws his hands up in front of his face to
keep from be?ing

blind?ed, and then he is

(melt?ing I'm melt?ing what a world oh what a world)

falling, he is be?ing whirled down through the pink storm,
out of Oz and back to

Kansas, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to

CHAP?TER V

THE PATH OF

THE BEAM

1

"—home," Ed?die mut?tered. His voice sound?ed thick and
punch-?drunk to his own

ears. "Back home, be?cause there's no place like home, no
in?deed."

He tried to open his eyes and at first couldn't. It was as if
they were glued shut. He

put the heel of his hand to his fore?head and pushed up,
tight?en?ing the skin on his

face. It worked; his eyes popped open. He saw nei?ther the
throne?room of the

Green Palace nor (and this was what he had re?al?ly ex?
pect?ed) the rich?ly ap?point?ed

but some?how claus?tro?pho?bic bed room in which he had
just been.

He was out?side, ly?ing in a small clear?ing of win?ter?

white grass. Near?by was a lit?tle

grove of trees, some still with their last brown leaves cling?ing to the branch?es.

And one branch with an odd white leaf, an al bi?no leaf. There was a pret?ty trick?le

of run?ning wa?ter far?ther in?to the grove. Stand?ing aban?doned in the high grass was

Su?san?nah's new and im proved wheelchair. There was mud on the tires, Ed?die

saw, and a few late leaves, crispy and brown, caught in the spokes. A few

swatch?es of grass, too. Over?head was a sky?ful of still white clouds, ev?ery bit as

in?ter?est?ing as a laun?dry-?bas?ket full of sheets.

The sky was clear when we went in?side the Palace, he thought, and re?al?ized time

had slipped again. How much or how lit?tle, he wasn't sure he want?ed to

know—Roland's world was like a trans?mis?sion with its gear-?teeth all but stripped

away; you nev?er knew when time was go?ing to pop in?to neu?tral or race you away

in over?drive.

Was this Roland's world, though? And if it was, how had they got?ten back to it?

"How should I know?" Ed?die croaked, and got slow?ly to his feet, winc?ing as he

did so. He didn't think he was hun?gover, but his legs were sore and he felt as if he

had just tak?en the world's heav?iest Sun?day af?ter noon nap.

Roland and Su?san?nah lay on the ground un?der the trees. The gun?slinger was

stir?ring, but Su?san?nah lay on her back, arms spread ex?trav?agant?ly wide, snor?ing in

an un?la?dy?like way that made Ed?die grin. Jake was near?by, with Oy sleep?ing on his

side by one of the kid's knees. As Ed?die looked at them, Jake opened his eyes and

sat up. His gaze was wide but blank; he was awake, but had been so heav?ily asleep

he didn't know it yet.

"Gruz," Jake said, and yawned.

"Yep," Ed?die said, "that works for me." He turned in a slow cir?cle, and had got?ten

three quarters of the way back to where he'd started when he saw the Green Palace

on the horizon. From here it looked very small, and its brilliance had been robbed

by the sunless day. Ed die guessed it might be thirty miles away. Leading toward

them from that direction were the tracks of Susanah's wheelchair.

He could hear the thinny, but faintly. He thought he could see it, as well—a

quicksilver shimmer like bogwater, stretching across the flat, open land . . . and

finally drying up about five miles away. Five miles west of here? Given the

location of the Green Palace and the fact that they had been traveling east on 1-

70, that was the natural assumption, but who really knew, especially with no

visible sun to use for orientation?

"Where's the turnpike?" Jake asked. His voice sounded thick and gummy. Oy

joined him, stretching first one rear leg, then the other. Ed die saw he had lost one

of his booties at some point.

"Maybe it was cancelled due to lack of interest."

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Jake said. Ed die looked at him sharply,

but didn't believe the kid was consciously riffing on The Wizard of Oz. "Not the

one where the Kansas City Royals play, not the one where the Monarchs play,

either."

"What gives you that idea?"

Jake hoisted a thumb toward the sky, and when Ed die looked up, he saw that he

had been wrong: it wasn't all still white overcast, boring as a basket of sheets.

Directly above their heads, a band of clouds was moiling toward the horizon as

steadily as a conveyor belt.

They were back on the Path of the Beam.

2

"Ed die? Where you at, sugar?"

Ed die looked down from the lane of clouds in the sky and saw Susanah sitting

up, rubbing the back of her neck. She looked unsure of where she was. Perhaps

even of who she was. The red cap she was wearing looked oddly dull in this

light, but they were still the brightest things in Edie's view ... until he looked

down at his own feet and saw the street-boppers with their Cuban heels. Yet these

also looked dull, and Edie no longer thought it was just the day's cloudy light that

made them seem so. He looked at Jake's shoes, Oy's remaining three slippers,

Roland's cow boy boots (the gun-slinger was sitting up now, arms crossed around

his knees, looking blankly off into the distance). All the same ruby red, but a

lifeless red, somehow. As if some magic essential to them had been used up.

Suddenly, Edie wanted them off his feet.

He sat down beside Susanah, gave her a kiss, and said: "Good morning, Sleeping

Beauty. Or afternoon, if it's that." Then, quickly, almost hating to touch them (it

was like touching dead skin, somehow), Edie yanked off the street-boppers. As

he did, he saw that they were scuffed at the toes and muddy at the heels, no longer

new looking. He'd wondered how they'd gotten here; now, feeling the ache in the

muscles of his legs and remembering the wheelchair tracks, he knew. They had

walked, by God. Walked in their sleep.

"That," Susanah said, "is the best idea you've had since . . . well, in a long time."

She stripped off the cap. Close by, Edie saw Jake taking off Oy's booties.

"Were we there?" Susanah asked him. "Edie, were we really there when he..."

"When I killed my mother," Roland said. "Yes, you were there. As I was. Gods

help me, I was there. I did it." He covered his face with his hands and began to

voice a series of harsh sobs.

Susanah crawled across to him in that agile way that was almost a version of

walk?ing. She put an arm around him and used her oth?er hand to take his hands

away from his face. At first Roland didn't want to let her do that, but she was

per?sis?tent, and at last his hands—those killer's hands—came down, re?veal?ing

haunt?ed eyes which swam with tears.

Su?san?nah urged his face down against her shoul?der. "Be easy, Roland," she said.

"Be easy and let it go. This part is over now. You past it."

"A man doesn't get past such a thing," Roland said. "No, I don't think so. Not

ev?er."

"You didn't kill her," Ed?die said.

"That's too easy." The gun?slinger's face was still against Su?san?nah's shoul?der, but

his words were clear enough. "Some re?spon?si?bil?ities can't be shirked. Some sins

can't be shirked. Yes, Rhea was there—in a way, at least—but I can't shift it all to

the Coos, much as I might like to."

"It wasn't her, ei?ther," Ed?die said. "That's not what I mean."

Roland raised his head. "What in hell's name are you talk?ing about?"

"Ka, " Ed?die said. "Ka like a wind."

3

In their packs there was food none of them had put there—cook?ies with Kee?bler

elves on the pack?ages, Saran Wrapped sand?wich?es that looked like the kind you

could get (if you were des?per?ate, that was) from turn?pike vend?ing ma?chines, and a

brand of co?la nei?ther Ed?die, Su?san?nah, nor Jake knew. It tast?ed like Coke and

came in a red and white can, but the brand was Nozz-?A-?La.

They ate a meal with their backs to the grove and their faces to the dis?tant glam-

gleam of the Green Palace, and called it lunch. If we start to lose the light in an

hour or so, we can make it sup?per by voice vote, Ed?die thought, but he didn't

be?lieve they'd need to. His in?te?ri?or clock was run ning again now, and that

mys?te?ri?ous but usu?al?ly ac?cu?rate de?vice sug gest?ed that it was ear?ly af?ter?noon.

At one point he stood up and raised his so?da, smil?ing in? to an in?vis?ible cam?era.

“When I’m trav?el?ing through the Land of Oz in my new Takuro Spir?it, I drink

Nozz-?A-?La!” he pro?claimed. “It fills me up but nev?er fills me out! It makes me

hap?py to be a man! It makes me know God! It gives me the out?look of an an?gel

and the balls of a tiger! When I drink Nozz-?A-?La, I say ‘Gosh! Ain’t I glad to be alive!’ I say—”

“Sit down, you bumhug,” Jake said, laugh?ing.

“Ug,” Oy agreed. His snout was on Jake’s an?kle, and he was watch ing the boy’s

sand?wich with great in?ter?est.

Ed?die start?ed to sit, and then that strange al?bi?no leaf caught his eye again. That’s

no leaf, he thought, and walked over to it. No, not a leaf but a scrap of pa?per. He

turned it over and saw columns of “blah blah” and “yak yak” and “all the stuff’s the

same.” Usu?al?ly news?pa?pers weren’t blank on one side, but Ed?die wasn’t sur?prised

to find this one was—the Oz Dai?ly Buzz had on?ly been a prop, af?ter all.

Nor was the blank side blank. Print?ed on it in neat, care?ful let?ters, was this

mes?sage:

Be?low that, a lit?tle draw?ing:

Ed?die brought the note back to where the oth?ers were eat?ing. Each of them looked

at it. Roland held it last, ran his thumb over it thought?ful?ly, feel?ing the tex?ture of

the pa?per, then gave it back to Ed?die.

“R.F.,” Ed?die said. “The man who was run?ning Tick-?Tock. This is from him, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He must have brought the Tick-?Tock Man out of Lud.”

“Sure,” Jake said dark?ly. “That guy Flagg looked like some?one who’d know a first-

class bumhug when he found one. But how did they get here be?fore us? What

could be faster than Blaine the Mono, for cripe's sake?"

"A door," Ed?die said. "Maybe they came through one of those spe?cial doors."

"Bin?go," Su?san?nah said. She held her hand out, palm up, and Ed?die slapped it.

"In any case, what he sug?gests is not bad ad?vice," Roland said. "I urge you to

con?sider it most se?rious?ly. And if you want to go back to your world, I will al?low

you to go."

"Roland, I can't be?lieve you," Ed?die said. "This, af?ter you dragged me and Suze

over here, kick?ing and scream?ing? You know what my broth?er would say about

you? That you're as con?trary as a hog on ice-?skates."

"I did what I did be?fore I learned to know you as friends," Roland said. "Be?fore I

learned to love you as I loved Alain and Cuth?bert. And be fore I was forced to ...

to re?vis?it cer?tain scenes. Do?ing that has ..." He paused, look?ing down at his feet

(he had put his old boots back on again) and think?ing hard. At last he looked up

again. "There was a part of me that hadn't moved or spo?ken in a good many years.

I thought it was dead. It isn't. I have learned to love again, and I'm aware that this

is prob?ably my last chance to love. I'm slow—Van?nay and Cort knew that; so did

my fa?ther—but I'm not stupid."

"Then don't act that way," Ed?die said. "Or treat us as if we were."

"What you call 'the bot?tom line,' Ed?die, is this: I get my friends killed. And I'm not

sure I can even risk do?ing that again. Jake es?pe?cial?ly.. . I... nev?er mind. I don't

have the words. For the first time since I turned around in a dark room and killed

my moth?er, I may have found some?thing more im?por?tant than the Tow?er. Leave it

at that."

"All right, I guess I can re?spect that."

"So can I," Su?san?nah said, "but Ed?die's right about ka." She took the note and ran

a fin?ger over it thought?ful?ly. "Roland, you can't talk

about that—ka, I mean—then

turn around and take it back again, just be'cause you get a
lit?tle low on willpow?er
and ded?ica?tion.“

”Willpow?er and ded?ica?tion are good words,” Roland re?
marked. ”There’s a bad one,

though, that means the same thing. That one is ob?ses?
sion.“

She shrugged it away with an im?pa?tient twitch of her
shoul?ders. ”Sug?arpie, ei?ther

this whole busi?ness is ka, or none of it is. And scary as ka
might be—the idea of

fate with ea?gle eyes and a blood?hound’s nose— I find the
idea of no ka even

scari?er.“ She tossed the R.F. note aside on the mat?ted
grass.

”What?ev?er you call it, you’re just as dead if it runs you
over,” Roland said. ”Rimer

. . . Thorin . . . Jonas . . . my moth?er . . . Cuth?bert . . . Su?
san. Just ask them. Any of

them. If you on?ly could.“

”You’re miss?ing the biggest part of this,” Ed?die said. ”You
can’t send us back.

Don’t you re?al?ize that, you big ga?loot? Even if there was
a door, we wouldn’t go

through it. Am I wrong about that?“

He looked at Jake and Su?san?nah. They shook their heads.
Even Oy shook his head.

No, he wasn’t wrong.

”We’ve changed,” Ed?die said. ”We...“ Now he was the one
who didn’t know how

to go on. How to ex?press his need to see the Tow?er . . .
and his oth?er need, just as

strong, to go on car?ry?ing the gun with the san?dal-?wood
in?sets. The big iron was

how he’d come to think of it. Like in that old Mar?ty Rob?
bins song about the man

with the big iron on his hip. ”It’s ka,” he said. It was all he
could think of that was

big enough to cov?er it.

”Ka?ka,” Roland replied, af?ter a mo?ment’s con?sid?er?
ation. The three of them stared

at him, mouths open. Roland of Gilead had made a joke.

saw,“ Su?san?nah said

hes?itant?ly. ”Why did your moth?er hide be?hind that drape when you came in,

Roland? Did she mean to...” She bit her lip, then brought it out. ”Did she mean to

kill you?”

”If she’d meant to kill me, she wouldn’t have cho?sen a belt as her weapon. The

very fact that she had made me a present—and that’s what it was, it had my ini?tials

wo?ven in?to it—sug?gests that she meant to ask my for?give?ness. That she had had a

change of heart.“

Is that what you know, or on?ly what you want to be?lieve? Ed?die thought. It was a

ques?tion he would nev?er ask. Roland had been test?ed enough, had won their way

back to the Path of the Beam by re?liv?ing that ter?ri?ble fi?nal vis?it to his moth?er’s

apart?ment, and that was enough.

”I think she hid be?cause she was ashamed,” the gun?slinger said. ”Or be?cause she

need?ed a mo?ment to think of what to say to me. Of how to ex?plain.“

”And the ball?” Su?san?nah asked him gen?tly. ”Was it on the van?ity ta?ble, where we

saw it? And did she steal it from your fa?ther?”

”Yes to both,” Roland said. ”Al?though . . . did she steal it?” He seemed to ask this

ques?tion of him?self. ”My fa?ther knew a great many things, but he some?times kept

what he knew to him?self.”

”Like him know?ing that your moth?er and Marten were see?ing each oth?er,”

Su?san?nah said.

”Yes.”

”But, Roland . . . you sure?ly don’t be?lieve that your fa?ther would know?ing?ly have

al?lowed you to ... to ...”

Roland looked at her with large, haunt?ed eyes. His tears had gone, but when he

tried to smile at her ques?tion, he was un?able. ”Have know?ing?ly al?lowed his son to

kill his wife?” he asked. ”No, I can’t say that. Much as I’d like to, I can’t. That he

should have caused such a thing to have happened, to have
deliberately set it in

motion, like a man playing Castles . . . that I cannot be-
lieve. But would he allow

it to run its course? Aye, most certainly.”

“What happened to the ball?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know. I fainted. When I awoke, my mother and I
were still alone, one

dead and one alive. No one had come to the sound of the
shots—the walls of that

place were thick stone, and that wing mostly empty as
well. Her blood had dried.

The belt she’d made me was covered with it, but I took it,
and I put it on. I wore

that bloodstained gift for many years, and how I lost it is a
tale for another

day—I’ll tell it to you before we have done, for it bears on
my quest for the Tower.

“But although no one had come to investigate the gun-
shots, someone had come for

another reason. While I lay fainted away by my moth-
er’s corpse, that someone

came in and took the wizard’s glass away.”

“Rhea?” Edie asked.

“I doubt she was so close in her body . . . but she had a way
of making friends, that

one. Aye, a way of making friends. I saw her again, you
know.” Roland explained

no further, but a stony gleam arose in his eyes. Edie had
seen it before, and knew

it meant killing.

Jake had retrieved the note from R.F. and now gestured
at the little drawing

beneath the message. “Do you know what this means?”

“I have an idea it’s the sigil of a place I saw when I first
traveled in the wizard’s

glass. The land called Thunderclap.” He looked around at
them, one by one. “I

think it’s there that we’ll meet this man—this thing—named
Flagg again.”

Roland looked back the way they had come, sleepwalking
in their fine red shoes.

“The Kansas we came through was his Kansas, and the
plague that emptied out

that land was his plague. At least, that’s what I believe.”

"But it might not stay there," Su?san?nah said.

"It could trav?el," Ed?die said.

"To our world," Jake said.

Still look?ing back to?ward the Green Palace, Roland said:
"To your world, or any
oth?er."

"Who's the Crim?son King?" Su?san?nah asked abrupt?ly.

"Su?san?nah, I know not."

They were qui?et, then, watch?ing Roland look to?ward the
palace where he had

faced a false wiz?ard and a true mem?ory and some?how
opened the door back to his

own world by so do?ing.

Our world, Ed?die thought, slip?ping an arm around Su?
san?nah. Our world now. If

we go back to Amer?ica, and per?haps we'll have to be?fore
this is over, we 'II ar?rive

as strangers in a strange land, no mat?ter what when it is.
This is our world now.

The world of the Beams, and the Guardians, and the Dark
Tow?er.

"We got some day?light left," he said to Roland, and put a
hes?itant hand on the

gun?slinger's shoul?der. When Roland im?me?di?ate?ly
cov?ered it with his own hand,

Ed?die smiled. "You want to use it, or what?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Let's use it." He bent and shoul?dered
his pack.

"What about the shoes?" Su?san?nah asked, look?ing
doubt?ful?ly at the lit?tle red pile
they had made.

"Leave them here," Ed?die said. "They've served their pur?
pose. In?to your

wheelchair, girl." He put his arms around her and helped
her in.

"All God's chil?dren have shoes," Roland mused. "Isn't that
what you said,

Su?san?nah?"

"Well," she said, set?tling her?self, "the cor?rect di?alect
adds a soup?con of fla?vor, but

you've got the essence, hon?ey, yes."

"Then we'll un?doubt?ed?ly find more shoes as God wills
it," Ro land said.

Jake was look?ing in?to his knap?sack, tak?ing in?ven?to?
ry of the food?stuffs that had

been added by some unknown hand. He held up a chicken leg in a Bag?gie, looked

at it, then looked at Ed?die. "Who do you suppose packed this stuff?"

Ed?die raised his eyebrows, as if to ask Jake how he could possibly be so stupid.

"The Kee?bler Elves," he said. "Who else? Come on, let's go."

5

They clustered near the grove, five wanderers on the face of an empty land. Ahead

of them, running across the plain, was a line in the grass which exactly matched

the lane of rushing clouds in the sky. This line was nothing so obvious as a path . .

. but to the awakened eye, the way that everything bent in the same direction was

as clear as a painted stripe.

The Path of the Beam. Somewhere ahead, where this Beam intersected all the

others, stood the Dark Tower. Ed?die thought that, if the wind were right, he would

almost be able to smell its sullen stone.

And roses—the dusky scent of roses.

He took Susan?nah's hand as she sat in her chair; Susan?nah took Roland's; Roland

took Jake's. Oy stood two paces before them, head up, scenting the autumn air that

combed his fur with unseen fingers, his gold-ringed eyes wide.

"We are ka-tet," Ed?die said. It crossed his mind to wonder at how much he'd

changed; how he had become a stranger, even to himself. "We are one from

many."

"Ka-tet," Susan?nah said. "We are one from many."

"One from many," Jake said. "Come on, let's go."

Bird and bear and hare and fish, Ed?die thought.

With Oy in the lead, they once more set out for the Dark Tower, walking along the

Path of the Beam.

AF?TER?WORD

The scene in which Roland bests his old teacher, Cort, and goes off to roister in

the less savory section of Gilead was written in the

spring of 1970. The one in

which Roland's father shows up the following morning
was written in the summer

of 1996. Although only sixteen hours pass between the
two occurrences in the

world of the story, twenty-six years had passed in the
life of the story's teller. Yet

the moment finally came, and I found myself confronting
myself across a whore's

bed—the unemployed schoolboy with the long black
hair and beard on one side,

the successful popular novelist (“America's shlock-
meister,” as I am affectionately

known by my legions of admiring critics) on the other.

I mention this only because it sums up the essential
weirdness of the Dark Tower

experience for me. I have written enough novels and
short stories to fill a solar

system of the imagination, but Roland's story is my
Jupiter—a planet that dwarfs

all the others (at least from my own perspective), a place
of strange atmosphere,

crazy landscape, and savage gravitational pull. Dwarfs
the others, did I say? I

think there's more to it than that, actually. I am coming
to understand that Roland's

world (or worlds) actually contains all the others of
my making; there is a place in

Mid-World for Randall Flagg, Ralph Roberts, the wan-
dering boys from The Eyes

of the Dragon, even Father Callahan, the damned priest
from 'Salem's Lot, who

rode out of New England on a Greyhound Bus and wound
up dwelling on the

border of a terrible Mid-World land called Thunder-
clap. This seems to be where

they all finish up, and why not? Mid-World was here first,
before all of them,

dreaming under the blue gaze of Roland's bombardier
eyes.

This book has been too long in coming—a good many
readers who enjoy Roland's

adventures have all but howled in frustration—and for
that I apologize. The

reason is best summed up by Susan's thought as she

pre?pare to tell Blaine the

first rid?dle of their con?test: It is hard to be?gin. There's
noth?ing in these pages that I
agree with more.

I knew that Wiz?ard and Glass meant dou?bling back to
Roland's young days, and to

his first love af?fair, and I was scared to death of that sto?
ry. Sus pense is rel?ative?ly

easy, at least for me; love is hard. Con?se?quent?ly I dal?
lied, I tem?po?rized, I

pro?cras?ti?nat?ed, and the book re?mained un?writ?ten.

I be?gan at last, work?ing in mo?tel rooms on my Mac?in?
tosh Power?Book, while

driv?ing cross-?coun?try from Col?orado to Maine af?ter
fin?ish?ing my work on the

minis?eries ver?sion of The Shin?ing. It oc?curred to me as I
drove north through the

de?sert?ed miles of west?ern Ne?bras?ka (where I al?so
hap?pened to be, driv?ing back

from Col?orado, when I got the idea for a sto?ry called
"Chil?dren of the Corn"), that

if I didn't start soon, I would nev?er write the book at all.

But I no longer know the truth of ro?man?tic love, I told
my?self. I know about

mar?riage, and ma?ture love, but forty-?eight has a way of
for?get?ting the heat and

pas?sion of sev?en?teen.

I will help you with that part, came the re?ply. I didn't
know who that voice

be?longed to on that day out?side Thet?ford, Ne?bras?ka,
but I do now, be cause I have

looked in?to his eyes across a whore's bed in a land that ex?
ists very clear?ly in my

imag?ina?tion. Roland's love for Su?san Del?ga?do (and
hers for him) is what was told

to me by the boy who be?gan this sto?ry. If it's right, thank
him. If it's wrong, blame

what?ev?er got lost in the trans?la?tion.

Al?so thank my friend Chuck Ver?rill, who edit?ed the book
and hung with me ev?ery

step of the way. His en?cour?age?ment and help were in?
valu?able, as was the

en?cour?age?ment of Elaine Koster, who has pub?lished all
of these cow boy

ro?mances in pa?per?back.

Most thanks of all go to my wife, who sup?ports me in this mad?ness as best she can

and helped me on this book in a way she doesn't even know. Once, in a dark time,

she gave me a fun?ny lit?tle rub?ber fig?ure that made me smile. It's Rock?et J.

Squir?rel, wear?ing his blue avi?ator's hat and with his arms brave?ly out?stretched. I

put that fig?ure on my manuscript as it grew (and grew ... and grew), hop?ing some

of the love that came with it would kind of fer?til?ize the work. It must have worked,

at least to a de?gree; the book is here, af?ter all. I don't know if it's good or bad—I

lost all sense of per?spec?tive around page four hun?dred—but it's here. That alone

seems like a mir?acle. And I have start?ed to be?lieve I might ac?tu?al?ly live to

com?plete this cy?cle of sto?ries. (Knock on wood.)

There are three more to be told, I think, two set chiefly in Mid-?World and one

al?most en?tire?ly in our world—that's the one deal?ing with the va?cant lot on the

com?er of Sec?ond and Forty-?sixth, and the rose that grows there. That rose, I must

tell you, is in ter?ri?ble dan?ger.

In the end; Roland's ka-?tet will come to the nightscape which is Thun?der?clap . . .

and to what lies be?yond it. All may not live to reach the Tow?er, but I be?lieve that

those who do reach it will stand and be true.

—Stephen King

Lovell, Maine, Oc?to?ber 27, 1996

STEPHEN KING, the world's best sell?ing nov?el?ist, is the au?thor of more than

thir?ty books, most re?cent?ly Des?per?ation, Rose Mad?der, In?som?nia, and The Green

Mile. His four vol?umes in the Dark Tow?er se?ries, in?clud?ing The Gun?slinger, The

Draw?ing of the Three, and The Waste Lands, are all avail?able in Plume trade

pa?per?back edi?tions. He lives in Ban?gor, Maine, with his wife, nov?el?ist Tabitha

King.